

The Representation of the Workhouse in Nineteenth-Century Culture

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Abstract

Drawing together a range of visual and textual materials, this thesis explores the multiple social, political and cultural meanings of the workhouse in the period 1834-1900. Chapter one discusses the ideas of cleanliness and dirt that were so intrinsically associated with the institution and analyses them in relation to the representation of the workhouse poor. In chapter two, I focus upon the representation of the workhouse master, a figure associated with cruelty and abuse. I suggest that satirical attacks on this Poor-Law official neutralised his threat by constructing an aura of ridicule that was impossible to shake off. Chapter three analyses the accounts of middle-class visitors who traversed the workhouse space and argues that these texts fed into the construction of a bourgeois sense of self. Finally, chapter four examines visual representations of the workhouse, exploring the ideologies embedded within these images and tracing how they shifted across the century.

In its focus upon the multiple and contradictory depictions of the workhouse that circulated throughout the period, the thesis demonstrates the culturally-constructed nature of the institution and argues that analysis of these various representations sheds light upon their cultural moments of production. Overall, the thesis makes the case that workhouse representations provide an insight into the issues and anxieties of nineteenth-century society.

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Introduction

The workhouse law! The workhouse law!
 The devil fetched it in his claw
 From dens, where fiends their imps torment
 And flung it in our parliament.¹

From hellish prison to charitable home, the nineteenth-century workhouse had many cultural incarnations. While the workhouse has attracted much attention in historical research, this project does not attempt to discuss or provide evidence of what the workhouses were like in fact; rather, it investigates how these institutions, in which paupers were housed, fed and put to work, were constructed textually and culturally, and explores the significance of these constructions.

Considering the period from 1834, the year which saw the introduction of the New Poor Law, to the end of the century, this study identifies the numerous and contradictory representations of the workhouse and examines how they generate meaning.² These representations are far from stable and coherent and their diversity throws light on the unstable nature of an institution that attempted to combine both coercive and charitable roles. An analysis of these representations reveals the social values and anxieties that inform them, drawing attention to ideas of gender, class, morality, philanthropy and authority. Thus, I argue that workhouse representations are complex cultural constructions that are inscribed with the values and ideologies of nineteenth-century society.

The nature of this study is informed by the relationship between text and context. All of the texts discussed in this thesis were engendered by the passing of the New Poor Law and they respond to, and feed into, public debates about pauperism and the treatment of the poor: they provide commentaries upon the workhouse regime, the architecture of the buildings, the

¹ ‘The Workhouse Song, Hereby Ordained to be Sung in all Union Beer-Shops Throughout the Queendom, to the Tune of the “Devil’s Own”’, *Penny Satirist*, 10 August 1839, p. 2.

² The New Poor Law is also known as the Poor Law Amendment Act.

forced separation of families, and the diet allowed to paupers. In order to identify the issues at stake in these texts, it is thus necessary to situate them in relation to the history, principles and vocabulary of their Poor Law context; locating workhouse texts within their historical time allows for a reading that takes account of the intense anxieties and social unease that characterised discussions about the New Poor Law.

Prior to the introduction of the New Poor Law, impoverished people were provided for by their parish under the Elizabethan Poor Law of 1601.³ Residents of the parish paid rates in order to support the destitute in workhouses or to provide them with outdoor relief, which usually took the form of money. Outdoor relief was common place and enabled the destitute to continue living in their own homes rather than having to seek food and shelter in the parish workhouse. In the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution and the Napoleonic wars, wide-spread poverty worsened and discomfort with the existing Poor Law began to grow. Complaints about the ‘evils’ of the current method of poor relief were widely reported in the papers.⁴ It was often difficult to determine just how poverty-stricken applicants for relief actually were and, as Michael Grogan has pointed out, ‘[r]eformers of the poor laws protested that the poor pretended to be needier than the facts warranted’.⁵ Not only was the system criticised for being too lenient, but it was also blamed for actively encouraging pauperism, to the detriment of honest ratepayers and the moral state of the country.⁶ In 1832, the year of the Great Reform Act, the Poor Law Commission began a nationwide survey to investigate poor relief, the findings of which were to result in the New Poor Law of 1834.

³ For more information on the provision for the poor prior to 1834, see Sidney Webb and Beatrice Webb, *English Poor Law History. Part 1: The Old Poor Law* (London: Frank Cass, 1963), or Paul A. Fidler, *Social Welfare in Pre-Industrial England: The Old Poor Law Tradition* (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave, 2006).

⁴ The term ‘evils’ is used frequently in connection with discussion of outdoor relief in official Poor Law documentation. See, for example, *Report from His Majesty’s Commissioners for Inquiring into the Administration and Practical Operation of the Poor Laws* (London: B. Fellowes, 1834).

⁵ M. Grogan, ‘Generosity and the Ghosts of Poor Laws Passed’, *Narrative*, 12:2 (2004), 151-166 (p. 152).

⁶ Lynn Mackay points out that ‘[i]n early nineteenth-century England, it was an upper-class common place that the poor law promoted pauperism. Many in the upper classes believed that it undermined initiative and the willingness to work hard, that it bred dependency, and that these moral failings were largely the cause of the ever-escalating levels of poor relief’. See Lynn MacKay, ‘A Culture of Poverty? The St. Martin in the Fields Workhouse, 1817’, *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 26:2 (1995), 209-231 (p. 209).

The New Poor Law overhauled the system of outdoor relief by seeking to make the workhouse the main form of support offered to the poor.⁷ Under this new law, parishes were grouped together into unions, and each union was tasked with providing a workhouse to accommodate all the paupers in those areas.⁸ The centralisation of the Poor Law intended to make workhouses throughout the country consistent in regime and practice.⁹ At the head of the new system were the three Poor Law Commissioners, based in Somerset House in London.¹⁰ Under their jurisdiction, each union workhouse was individually governed by a board of guardians, made up of elected professional male residents of the union's parishes.¹¹ The guardians oversaw the business of the workhouse, made decisions on applications for admission and relief, and heard complaints, amongst other duties. At the bottom of this chain of power, overseen by the guardians, were the master and matron of the workhouse. These paid employees lived in the institution and were responsible for its day-to-day running.

The inauguration of a deterrent workhouse regime was crucial to the overall aim to reduce pauperism. By making the workhouses unpleasant, the New Poor Law aimed to discourage people from living idly inside them, or even taking up the offer of shelter in the institution in the first place. Workhouses were thus designed upon the principle of 'less

⁷ As historians have pointed out, it was never the intention of the New Poor Law to stop the outdoor relief given to certain groups of people (i.e. the elderly) and, in fact, the practice of outdoor relief continued throughout the century. David Ashforth notes that, in some areas, outdoor relief continued to be given to able-bodied men. See David Ashforth, 'The Urban Poor Law', in *The New Poor Law in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Derek Fraser (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1976), pp. 128-148 (p. 133).

⁸ In reality, many unions resistant to the New Poor Law failed to build a union workhouse until much later in the century and continued to house the poor in parish workhouses, the conditions of which were often worse than those of the union houses. See *ibid.*, p. 139.

⁹ The implementation of the Poor Law was resisted for years by some authorities, particularly in Northern areas, who opposed being ruled by a central authority. For more information, see *ibid.*, pp. 128-148. Not all workhouses came under the jurisdiction of the New Poor Law; those workhouses formed under Thomas Gilbert's Act (1782) were able to continue independently of the Poor Law. For more information on the Gilbert unions, see Felix Driver, *Power and Pauperism: The Workhouse System, 1834-1884* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 42-47. This thesis is concerned with the overall concept of the workhouse rather than different types of workhouses.

¹⁰ The three Poor Law Commissioners were replaced in 1847 by the Poor Law Board. When the Board was abolished in 1871, the control of the Poor Law passed to the newly-established Local Government Board. For a timeline of the workhouse, see Peter Higginbotham, 'Workhouse Timeline', *The Workhouse*. Available online at: www.workhouses.org.uk [date accessed 17 September 2013].

¹¹ The first female guardian was not elected until 1875.

eligibility', which meant that the accommodation offered by the institution should be less desirable than the home of the most poorly-paid independent labourer. The theory was that those who were truly needy would take up the option of going into the workhouse and that anyone who refused the offer was probably workshy or not really in need of assistance.

Known as the 'workhouse test', this deterrent system was criticised for its failure to take into account the reality that work was sometimes impossible to find, even for those who wanted it, or that a worker might not be able to support a family with several dependants. The workhouse was also often the only option left to elderly people who could no longer work. To have no savings to fall back upon was, in the eyes of the New Poor Law, evidence of a profligate nature.¹²

Those who did become indoor paupers had to wear a uniform, submit to a rigidly-enforced timetable that dictated meal, work and bed times, eat a strictly-regulated diet and, in the case of able-bodied adults, carry out physically-demanding work. Most controversially, paupers in the workhouse were classified according to age and sex, and segregated from other classes of paupers.¹³ Thus, families were separated in the workhouse: they slept in different wards, occupied different rooms during the day, and ate meals at different tables. As well as serving to make the workhouse disciplinary, the classification system sought to limit the spread of moral contamination between paupers. Without such measures it was feared that children and other vulnerable inmates would be permanently corrupted by hardened, vice-

¹² Ursula Henriques draws attention to the ambiguities surrounding the treatment of the elderly under the new system; she points out that though '[w]here possible they continued on out-relief in their own homes [...and...] when friendless they were taken in [to the workhouse], and supposed to get appropriate "comforts"', [... the workhouse...] was also intended to force the unfilial poor to care for their ancient relatives, or alternatively, to induce people to save for their declining years and thus avoid the terrors of the "refuge"'. See Ursula Henriques, 'How Cruel was the Victorian Poor Law?', *Historical Journal*, 11:2 (1968), 365-371 (p. 368).

¹³ Felix Driver points out that, '[i]n 1842, the Commissioners' Workhouse Rules Order specified a minimum classification of workhouse inmates into seven classes: aged and infirm men, able-bodied men over fifteen years of age, boys between seven and fifteen, aged and infirm women, able-bodied women over fifteen, girls between seven and fifteen, and children under seven. The Order stated that "a ward or separate building and yard" should be assigned to each category of pauper, "without communication with those of any other class"'. See Driver, *Power and Pauperism*, pp. 64-65.

ridden paupers. On a more basic level, the classification system also had a preventative function: the separation of men and women meant that, at least while they were in the workhouse, no further pauper babies would be conceived to become burdens on the rates.

The poor's hatred of the institution throughout its lifetime is well documented. As David Roberts points out, '*The Times* never tired of telling of its horrors'.¹⁴ Contemporary reports in this newspaper suggest that the destitute poor would sometimes choose to starve to death, or else turn to prostitution or thievery, in order to avoid being becoming subject to the regime of the institution and experiencing the loss of dignity this entailed.¹⁵ The workhouse acquired the grim reputation of treating paupers the same as, or even worse than, convicted criminals and the similarity between the workhouse and the prison is a recurring topic in anti-Poor Law commentary. When the first New Poor Law workhouses were built, they were based upon a prison-system design inspired by Jeremy Bentham that prioritised surveillance, and soon became known colloquially as the 'bastille'.¹⁶ Within these institutions, workhouse paupers had to complete tasks more usually associated with the penitentiary, such as stone-breaking and oakum-picking. Contemporary accounts suggest that there was a predominant opinion among the poor that prison was a better alternative to the workhouse: prisoners were fed a more substantial diet and had less work exacted from them than paupers.¹⁷ There are several reports of paupers damaging workhouse property so as to be sent to prison and enjoy the more comfortable lifestyle led there.¹⁸ Rather than correcting the poor, the prospect of the disciplinary workhouse was thus blamed for pushing the destitute into vice and criminality; it

¹⁴ David Roberts, 'How Cruel was the Victorian Poor Law?', *Historical Journal*, 6:1 (1963), 97-107 (p. 98).

¹⁵ Ashforth points out that '[p]rospective workhouse inmates were left in no doubt as to the horrific conditions and treatment they could expect to meet'. See Ashforth, 'The Urban Poor Law', p. 129.

¹⁶ Jeremy Bentham designed a plan for a panopticon prison, in which the inmates would feel as if they were constantly under observation. See Jeremy Bentham, 'Panopticon; or, The Inspection House [...] in a Series of Letters, Written in the Year 1787....' (1791), in *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*, ed. John Bowring (Edinburgh: Simpkin, Marshall, & Co., no date). Bentham's panopticon is discussed in chapter two.

¹⁷ This unfavourable comparison of the workhouse with the prison is frequently satirised in popular periodicals. One such example from amongst the numerous articles and poems is 'The Pauper's Song' (1845), published in *Punch*, which plays upon the seeming advantages that the criminal enjoys over the pauper. 'The Pauper's Song', *Punch*, 18 January 1845, p. 38.

¹⁸ For one such example, see 'Police', *Illustrated London News*, 7 January 1843, p. 14.

seems that deliberately falling foul of state law was a way to avoid becoming a victim of the Poor Law, or else to ensure a transfer from workhouse to prison.

In recent history, no institution has generated the same intensity of feeling as the workhouse. Despite continued protest against these institutions, they remained open until well into the twentieth century: it was not until 1948 that the Poor Law was officially abolished, though many workhouses by this point had been renamed and transformed into specialised institutions.¹⁹ Many of the buildings used as workhouses went on to be hospitals, but the fear evoked by the workhouse did not dissipate after the function of the buildings changed. The association of the physical site with the workhouse was such that, years after the last institutions closed, tales still circulate of a generation of working-class people reluctant to receive medical treatment in the space that they had once loathed.

The New Poor Law, and the workhouses that operated under this, have been extensively analysed by historians and social scientists. These studies tend to prioritise documentary material relating to the New Poor Law, such as workhouse records, correspondence and reports, architectural plans and parliamentary papers, and to collate data about the institutions. These studies lay claim to a factual examination of archival material in order to show how the workhouses functioned in practice. Some examples of the many historical studies about the New Poor Law and its workhouses are S. and B. Webb's *English Poor Law History*, Michael Rose's *The English Poor Law*, Norman Longmate's *The Workhouse*, Margaret Crowther's *The Workhouse System* and Felix Driver's *Power and Pauperism*.²⁰ Another trend in historical research has been to analyse individual workhouses and to identify how a single institution developed across a certain time period. Ian

¹⁹ For more information on the workhouse system in the twentieth century and the end of the Poor Law, see M. A. Crowther, *The Workhouse System 1834-1929: The History of an English Social Institution* (Cambridge: Methuen, 1983), pp. 88-112.

²⁰ Sidney Webb and Beatrice Webb, *English Poor Law History. Part 2: The Last Hundred Years* (London: Frank Cass, 1963), Michael E. Rose, *The English Poor Law, 1780-1930* (Newton Abbot: David and Charles, 1971), Norman Longmate, *The Workhouse: A Social History* (London: Temple Smith, 1974), Crowther, *The Workhouse System*, Driver, *Power and Pauperism*.

Anstruther's *The Scandal of the Andover Workhouse*, J. H. Thomas and W. E. Wilkins's *The Bridgend-Cowbridge Union*, Bernard Lewis's *Swansea and the Workhouse* and Margaret Drinkall's *Rotherham Workhouse* are examples of some of the numerous studies that focus upon specific institutions.²¹ As well as collating hundreds of documents about the workhouse system, Peter Higginbotham's website *The Workhouse* provides information on the histories of individual workhouses.²² Historians and social scientists have also explored specific aspects of the workhouse, such as the dietary allowance of the paupers and workhouse medicine.²³ Robert M. Gutchen, in his discussion of workhouse masters, evaluates the available documentary sources relevant to these officials and argues that more local historical studies are needed to better understand their roles and activities.²⁴ In recent years, one of the most significant studies is Kathryn Morrison's examination of workhouse architecture.²⁵ Her research traces the developments of workhouse design across the century and evaluates the practical reasons and ideological values behind it.

Despite their emphasis upon documentary evidence, it is interesting to note the number of historians who make reference to Charles Dickens's novel *Oliver Twist* (serialised in *Bentley's Magazine* 1837-1839). The rags-to-riches tale of a workhouse boy, who famously asked the workhouse master for more gruel, sensationalised the workhouse and has become intrinsically associated with the institution in the cultural imagination. David Roberts, writing in the 1960s, notes that in a random sample of 72 earlier historians, sixteen

²¹ Ian Anstruther, *The Scandal of Andover Workhouse* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1973), J. H. Thomas and W. E. Wilkins, *The Bridgend-Cowbridge Union: Workhouse and Guardians* (Cowbridge: D. Brown & Sons, 1995), Bernard Lewis, *Swansea and the Workhouse: the Poor Law in 19th Century Swansea* (Swansea: West Glamorgan Archive Service, 2003), Margaret Drinkall, *Rotherham Workhouse* (Stroud: The History Press, 2009).

²² Higginbotham, *The Workhouse*.

²³ See for example, Ian Miller, 'Feeding in the Workhouse: The Institutional and Ideological Functions of Food in Britain, ca. 1834-70', *Journal of British Studies*, 52:4 (2013), 940-962, and Ruth Richardson and Brian Hurwitz, 'Joseph Rogers and the Reform of Workhouse Medicine', *History Workshop Journal*, 43 (1997), 218-225.

²⁴ Robert M. Gutchen, 'Masters of Workhouses under the New Poor Law', *Local Historian*, 16 (1984), 93-99.

²⁵ Kathryn Morrison, *The Workhouse: A Study of Poor-Law Buildings in England* (Swindon: English Heritage at the National Monuments Record Centre, 1999).

‘refer to the miseries of Oliver Twist’.²⁶ Many more historians since then have also made reference to Dickens’s eponymous hero, suggesting that, when it comes to the workhouse, *Oliver Twist* offers a shared cultural reference point. While most historians simply refer to *Oliver Twist* in passing, some have investigated Oliver’s workhouse more thoroughly; Josef L. Altholz’s article ‘Oliver Twist’s Workhouse’, for example, argues that this workhouse is actually based upon a pre-1834 institution.²⁷ More recently, historian Ruth Richardson in *Dickens and the Workhouse* identifies the specific workhouse in London that may have been the inspiration for *Oliver Twist*.²⁸

The sheer quantity of historical research on the workhouse is testament to the political and social importance of this institution. It seems remarkable then, that other than *Oliver Twist*, the myriad of literary and cultural manifestations of the workhouse have largely been neglected. In historical studies, these representations are usually analysed only in terms of how they support the available data. Images, in particular, are often not analysed at all, but, when they are, serve only to add visual impact to the research presented.

In literary and cultural criticism, there has been no study that draws together and analyses the diverse modes of workhouse representation that circulated during the nineteenth century.²⁹ Research that does pay attention to workhouse texts tends to discuss them as part of a larger argument about other topics. The workhouse has been discussed, for example, by literary critics Karen Chase in relation to old age and Tara Moore in relation to Christmas charity.³⁰ Other critics who have considered the workhouse and related themes include Robert D. Butterworth, who focuses upon the workhouse in relation to Thomas Hood’s

²⁶ Roberts, ‘How Cruel was the Victorian Poor Law?’, p. 100.

²⁷ Josef L. Altholz, ‘Oliver Twist’s Workhouse’, *Dickensian*, 97 (2001), 137-146.

²⁸ Ruth Richardson, *Dickens and the Workhouse: Oliver Twist and the London Poor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

²⁹ On institutions more generally, John Bender’s *Imagining the Penitentiary* examines the construction of the eighteenth-century prison in relation to history, literature and visual culture, a cross-generic exploration that resonates with this study of workhouse representations. See John B. Bender, *Imagining the Penitentiary: Fiction and the Architecture of Mind in Eighteenth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

³⁰ See Karen Chase, *The Victorians and Old Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009) and Tara Moore, *Victorian Christmas in Print* (New York: Palgrave, 2009).

poetry, and M. Colleen Willenbring, who analyses the *Report of Great Britain's Poor Law Commission* and links the characterisation of the poor in the text to strategies employed in later realist fictions.³¹ As in historical research, the workhouse is frequently discussed in literary criticism in relation to *Oliver Twist* and Charles Dickens's representation of the New Poor Law more generally.³² However, Peter Stoke's article 'Bentham, Dickens and the Uses of the Workhouse' is one of the few studies to focus specifically upon the workhouse in the novel.³³ Stoke emphasises the duality of the institution and argues that it is simultaneously a place of hatred and of love. Though the workhouse is not the main subject explored, two of the most influential studies that have informed this thesis are Sally Ledger's exploration of the radical anti-Poor Law cartoons that circulated in the 1830s and 40s, and Seth Koven's cultural-historical analysis of the text 'A Night in a Workhouse'.³⁴

By contrast to these often tangential discussions of the workhouse, this study explores the mass of workhouse representations and the significance of these, relocating the various cultural constructions of the workhouse as central to the understanding of its functions and those of the society in which it existed. As well as the plethora of literary representations, the thesis re-evaluates material that is traditionally analysed by other disciplines, such as history

³¹ Robert D. Butterworth, 'Thomas Hood, Early Victorian Christian Social Criticism and the Hoodian Hero', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 39 (2011), 427-441, and M. Colleen Willenbring, "'Their Discontent has been abated": Commissioned Happiness in Poor Law Reform', *The Victorian*, 1:1 (2013), 1-9. In relation to the Old Poor Law, W. K. Thomas has discussed the workhouse in George Crabbe's 'The Village' and examined the selectiveness of this representation, while Scott Mackenzie has examined how the language of the Poor Law infiltrates Ann Radcliffe's novels. See W. K. Thomas, 'Crabbe's Workhouse', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 32:2 (1969), 149-161 and Scott R. Mackenzie, 'An Englishwoman's Workhouse is her Castle: Poor Management and Gothic Fiction in the 1790s', *English Literary History*, 74:3 (2007), 681-705.

³² Harry Stone, for example, as part of his study on cannibalism in the texts of Charles Dickens, draws attention to the cannibalism implicit in the workhouse scenes in *Oliver Twist*. See Harry Stone, *The Night Side of Dickens: Cannibalism, Passion, Necessity* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1994), pp. 79-81. Susan Zlotnick analyses the novel in relation to the New Poor Law's stance on bastardy. See Susan Zlotnick, "'The Law's a Bachelor": *Oliver Twist*, Bastardy, and the New Poor Law', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 34 (2006), 131-146.

³³ Peter M. Stoke, 'Bentham, Dickens and the Uses of the Workhouse', *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 41:4 (2001), 711-727.

³⁴ See Sally Ledger, *Dickens and the Popular Radical Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), and Seth Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (Princeton, N.J.; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006). James Greenwood's 'A Night in a Workhouse' is an undercover exploration of a workhouse casual ward that generated sensation when it was published in 1866 in the *Pall Mall Gazette*. I discuss this text in chapter one.

and architecture, as inscriptions of contemporary values. The project thus draws together the novels, short fiction, poems, ballads, newspaper articles, Poor Law records, architectural reports, medical journalism, wood-engravings and paintings which deal with workhouse-related themes. These texts are all implicitly in dialogue with one another, reacting to contemporary discussion about the workhouse and building upon, explicitly or otherwise, previous workhouse commentaries.

The thesis aims to explore the various agendas of these workhouse representations, identifying, for example, whether they worked to stir up political agitation against the institution, or conversely, to instil in readers a sense of civic pride about the workhouses. The majority of the texts discussed address a readership that is implicitly middle-class. While some texts are purportedly written by paupers or former paupers, these are few and far between and are often filtered through the framing narrative of a middle-class visitor or editor. All of these texts are ostensibly about the workhouse and the condition of life inside these institutions, but many of them, in fact, reveal much more about the social values and ideologies of the writer than they do about the experience of the pauper. Some of the workhouse representations, particularly those that feature middle-class charity, become a canvas for the forging of a middle-class sense of self.

Central to the thesis is a close analysis of these workhouse texts within the thematic strands of cleanliness and dirt, workhouse masters, visitors, and visual culture. The thesis takes this thematic, rather than chronological, approach to the material because these themes overlap and repeat themselves throughout the century. The chapters are cross-generic in terms of texts that they discuss, as the same ideas appear across many different textual genres. Thus, factual and fictional texts are discussed alongside one another because they deal with similar issues and anxieties. Indeed, fact and fiction are often intermingled within the space of an individual text: many of the factual accounts are so sensationalised that they

have, inevitably, become fictionalised, while fictional accounts lay claim to, and may have their origins in fact.³⁵ The study attributes equal importance to factual and fictional material on the basis that analysis of each genre yields valuable meanings and throws light on cultural and social ideologies.³⁶

Newspapers, in particular, are an important source for this thesis because of the coverage that they gave to the workhouse. In the aftermath of the 1834 Act, reports on the New Poor Law, the politics behind and the reactions to it, were almost constantly debated in the newspapers. Protest against the workhouse system was especially strong during the 1830s and 40s, a period of economic depression. During these decades especially, sensational newspaper reports and stories about the maltreatment of paupers proliferated and were collected in *The Book of the Bastiles* [sic], a publication which compiled many melodramatic newspaper stories about the New Poor Law.³⁷ These texts had a political agenda: they sensationalised the horrors of the workhouse and sought to agitate for reform, encouraging readers to join the protest against the new system. Lengthy reports about the condition of workhouses or the welfare of the inmates were published throughout the century and, when a particular scandal was uncovered, newspapers across the country would provide updates, sometimes on a daily basis, about the progression of the case. Not all newspaper accounts attacked the workhouse, however, and, many of the same publications that had previously denounced the workhouse, at other moments promulgated positive representations of the institution. In coverage given to the many new workhouses built during the century, the institutions are often represented in a celebratory way which commends their enforcement of

³⁵ Roberts points out that an examination of 21 stories appearing as part of an anti-workhouse campaign in *The Times*, a publication associated with fact, concluded that '12 were largely false, 5 were largely correct, and 4 went uninvestigated'. See Roberts, 'How Cruel was the New Poor Law?', p. 102.

³⁶ Both factual and fictional workhouse texts have had a significant cultural legacy. For example, both the 'Amateur Casual', as the narrator of 'A Night in a Workhouse' was known, and Dickens's *Oliver Twist* became famous figures in contemporary popular and critical discussion about the workhouse.

³⁷ G. R. Wythen Baxter, *The Book of the Bastiles; or, the History of the Working of the New Poor Law* (London: J. Stevens, 1841).

segregation. Short reports of minor infractions in the institution, popular-interest anecdotes (such as the short notice about a pauper who inherited a fortune), and seemingly mundane items about new washing machines also made the news.³⁸ Appeals for books, advertisements for workhouse masters and matrons, and invitations for tenders to provide food, clothes and other items are also frequently to be found in the papers, making the workhouse a part of day-to-day life for readers.

The instability of the workhouse in nineteenth-century culture is emphasised by the visiting and social-investigation narratives that became increasingly prominent as the century progressed and which are also fundamental to this study. Visiting accounts, for the first time, provided readers with an insight into the everyday life of workhouse paupers and made the experience a topic of public discussion. Workhouse visiting accounts fall generally into two groups: those of (usually male) pseudo-officials who describe touring the institution and comment upon the system, and those of (usually female) well-wishers who describe visiting the paupers on a regular basis in order to provide moral guidance and friendship. Each of the narrators inflects their account with their own personal values and interpretations; they are frequently equivocal about the workhouse and its function, praising a particular aspect of the house at one moment and condemning another in the next, leading to an ambivalent representation of the institution. Workhouse visitors were at the forefront of the campaign for better conditions for paupers: the Workhouse Visiting Society was inaugurated in 1858 and its journal (1859-1865) published reports and correspondence on workhouse-related topics. In particular, the society encouraged leisured women to become more socially aware and to devote some of their spare time to improving the lives of the paupers. Several articles in less specialised periodicals also worked to this end, persuading their female readers to carry out the philanthropic task of visiting.

³⁸ For the brief report on the pauper and her surprise inheritance, see 'Miss Hedley, Eighty-one Years of Age [...]', *Illustrated London News*, 19 April 1873, p. 366. The *Illustrated London News* contains numerous more fascinating anecdotes about workhouse paupers.

Short fictional stories, poems and songs about the workhouse also circulated. During the 1830s and 40s especially, numerous periodicals and magazines represented the cruelty and corruptions of the workhouse system in satirical literary sketches, poems and stories, all of which reacted to anti-workhouse feeling and sought to generate it. The workhouse also featured in more ephemeral literary culture, namely broadside ballads and broadsides more generally. Set to a well-known tune, the one-page broadside ballads attack the cruelty of the institution through the medium of song. Though less enduring than novels or even newspaper reports, the representation of the workhouse in these ballads would have reached a larger audience than a lengthy report and so are integral to the construction of the workhouse in the popular imagination. Like the newspaper and visitor accounts, however, the representation of the institution in these texts is also inherently unstable. By contrast to the depiction of the workhouse as a fate worse than death as is common in many satirical and sensational attacks, other texts, such as Harriet Martineau's propagandist stories, *Poor Laws and Paupers Illustrated* (1833), promulgate the deterrent workhouse as necessary for the reform of the immoral and workshy poor.³⁹ More texts still represent the workhouse as a space in which the poor are cared for better than they would be in their own homes. Frequently couched within a discourse of sentimentality, there is often a great sense of pathos attached to the pauper inhabitants, which conveys the sadness of elderly people or children living in an institution.⁴⁰ This sadness, however, is often linked to the failure of their families to provide for them. These texts are more a critique of the wider social issues of poverty than of the specific institution.

³⁹ Harriet Martineau, *Poor Laws and Paupers Illustrated* (London: Charles Fox, 1833).

⁴⁰ Poems are particularly common and several of these focus upon the pathos of elderly couples forced to sell off their meagre possessions and go into the workhouse. Amongst others, M. W. H., 'The Old English Labourer', *Hood's Magazine*, March 1848, p. 212, 'In the Union', *Once a Week*, 5 September 1874, p. 5, Isabella Fyvie Mayo, 'Off to "The House"', *Good Words*, January 1879, pp. 736-737, Frederick Langbridge, 'Going into the House: Or, The Little Crutch', *Time*, January 1884, pp. 62-65.

Oliver Twist is the most famous novel to discuss the workhouse and provoked, in its moment, numerous reviews, spin-offs and caricatures in other magazines.⁴¹ Intertextual references to Bumble and Oliver proliferate in nineteenth-century culture, suggesting the impact of this novel in the creation of a vocabulary specific to the workhouse. However, the institution itself is actually much more of a central focus in Fanny Trollope's later novel *Jessie Phillips* (serialised in parts 1842-1843), which takes the New Poor Law and the union workhouses as its central theme. In addition to these two texts, the workhouse is also a hovering menace in the background of many other novels that are not immediately associated with the institution. In *Jane Eyre* (1847), Jane, desolately wandering the moors after leaving Thornfield, ponders over her own death: "Well; I would rather die yonder than in a street, or on a frequented road," I reflected. "And far better that crows and ravens – if any ravens there be in these regions – should pick my flesh from my bones, than that they should be prisoned in a work-house coffin and moulder in a pauper's grave."⁴² In *North and South* (serialised in *Household Words* 1854-1855), the middle-class Margaret Hale explains to her poor friend Bessie that working life in the country is nothing to glamorise; as she points out, 'an old man gets racked with rheumatism, and bent and withered before his time; yet he must just work on the same, or else go to the workhouse'.⁴³ The character of Betty Higden in *Our Mutual Friend* (serialised in parts 1864-1865) is used to draw attention to the poor's hatred of the workhouses: Betty states, '[k]ill me sooner than take me there. Throw this pretty child under cart-horses' feet and a loaded wagon, sooner than take him there. Come to us and find us all

⁴¹ Juliet John points out that '[t]he inadequate copyright laws in Dickens's day [...] meant that the story of *Oliver Twist* was never fully under his control. It was "extracted" in newspapers and performed on the stage as soon as it was published, without Dickens receiving a penny. Journalism and theatre played as important a part in the cultural dissemination and reception of Dickens in the Victorian period as the screenplays today.' See Juliet John, *Dickens and Mass Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 215.

⁴² Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ed. Margaret Smith (1847; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 330.

⁴³ Elizabeth Gaskell, *North and South*, ed. Angus Easson (1855; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 133.

a-dying, and set a light to us all where we lie, and let us all blaze away with the house into a heap of cinders, sooner than move a corpse of us there'.⁴⁴

The gloomy representation of the workhouse is still apparent later in the century, notably in Thomas Hardy's *Far From the Madding Crowd* (serialised in the *Cornhill Magazine* 1874), in which Fanny Robin manages to drag herself to the workhouse before dying. In *New Grub Street* (1891), the struggling writer, Edwin Reardon, lives next door to a workhouse and listens to the ominous chiming of the workhouse clock, 'a thin, querulous voice, reminding one of the community it represented'.⁴⁵ In these novels, and many more, the workhouse is sometimes referenced no more than a couple of times, but these references are loaded with significance for the contemporary reader. The institution is an underlying threat beneath the narrative, connected with misery, despair, loneliness and death, and serves to remind readers about the precariousness of financial independence.

As well as written texts, visual representations had a powerful impact on the construction of the workhouse in nineteenth-century culture, although they have previously received very little critical attention. Thanks to the rise of wood-engraving, which meant that images could be printed at the same time and on the same page as written text, visual representations of the workhouse appeared in newspapers, in novels and alongside poems, stories and articles in periodicals. Workhouse images often serve to further destabilise the corresponding textual representations of the workhouse, undermining the written description or generating additional meanings. In fiction, George Cruikshank's illustrations of *Oliver Twist* and John Leech's illustrations of *Jessie Phillips* create a visual narrative of the workhouse that both complements, and complicates, the written text. As well as newly-built workhouses, periodicals and newspapers published images of paupers in the house, visitors handing out treats and special celebrations. Publications such as the *Illustrated London News*

⁴⁴ Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* (1865; London: Dent, 1963), p. 188.

⁴⁵ George Gissing, *New Grub Street*, ed. John Goode (1891; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 121.

and the *Graphic* included engravings of the Christmas celebrations enjoyed by the paupers that seem to represent the workhouse positively as a charitable environment. While illustrations of the workhouse proliferated in the periodical press, the workhouse was also deemed by some artists a worthy subject for representation in painting. Charles West Cope's *Poor Law Guardians: Board Day: Application for Bread* (1841), Luke Fildes' *Applicants for Admission to a Casual Ward* (1874), James Charles's *Our Poor: A Bible Reading, Chelsea Workhouse* (1877) and Hubert Von Herkomer's *Eventide – A Scene in the Westminster Union* (1878) are all concerned with depicting workhouse themes.⁴⁶

The thesis is divided into four main sections. In chapter one, I examine the construction of the workhouse space in relation to ideas about dirt and sanitation. I consider the cleanliness of the institution as a disciplinary tool that sought to 'cleanse' the morals of the poor. In this chapter, I also analyse the contradictory representations of the institution as a den of filth, which facilitated the spread of disease and decreased the chances of the paupers finding work outside it. The chapter also discusses the threat of moral contagion that pervaded the institution and pays particular attention to how workhouse girls were constructed in the literature of the period. In chapter two, I move from the paupers who resided in the workhouse space, to focus upon the master who ruled over them. The first part examines the panopticon-inspired designs of the workhouse and how these positioned the master at the centre of the institution, investing power in his gaze. I then focus upon some of the notorious scandals in which the workhouse master played a key role, before discussing how satiric representation sought to contain the threat associated with this figure. Finally, I consider how the stigma of 'Bumble' was impossible to shake off and how the master was himself oppressed by his representation in the press. Moving on from the residents of the

⁴⁶ Charles West Cope, *Poor Law Guardians: Board Day: Application for Bread* (1841), reproduction held in Witt Library, Courtauld Institute of Art, London [reproduced in Morrison, *The Workhouse*, p. 81], Luke Fildes, *Applicants for Admission to a Casual Ward* (1874), Royal Holloway, University of London, James Charles, *Our Poor: A Bible Reading, Chelsea Workhouse* (1877), Warrington Museum and Art Gallery, Warrington, Hubert Von Herkomer, *Eventide – A Scene in the Westminster Union* (1878), Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool.

workhouse, chapter three analyses the representations of well-to-do outsiders who passed in and out of the institution, visiting it for the sake of curiosity or else to provide a moral example to the paupers. Central to this chapter are social investigation narratives and accounts of befriending the paupers. Finally, chapter four focuses upon predominantly visual materials, analysing the relationship between text and image in the construction of the workhouse. In this chapter, I first examine the anti-Poor Law caricatures of the 30s and 40s, followed by the more realistic sketches that sought to condemn the workhouse. These hostile workhouse depictions are compared with the architectural images of new workhouse buildings and the discourse of celebration that surrounded them. In the final section, I consider how other illustrations and paintings sought to convey a deliberately rose-tinted representation of the workhouse. Together, these chapters argue that representations of the workhouse are a lens through which the values and ideologies of nineteenth-century culture can be analysed.

Chapter One

The 'Unclean' Poor

Sanitary reform emerged in the 1830s, in response to anxieties about the health of the nation and problems of overcrowding amongst the working classes.¹ As miasmatic disease theories promulgated the belief that all illness was inhaled from foul air, the overcrowded and filthy tenements of the poor were believed to be noxious sites of contagion, from which the poisonous atmosphere could seep out to infect the more affluent surrounding areas.² Sanitary reform thus focused predominantly on the houses of the working classes who lived in densely populated areas. Edwin Chadwick's *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* (1842) was one of the earliest and most influential investigations into the sanitary state of the nation.³ Nineteenth-century reports such as this draw attention to the filthy conditions in which the poor lived and emphasise not only the relationship between dirt, disease and degeneracy, but also the role that buildings played in constructing the health and morals of individuals.⁴ A letter from the clerk of the Stafford Poor Law union, included in Chadwick's *Report*, seeks to demonstrate this reciprocal relationship between the sanitary state of buildings and the morals of the residents. As an example, the text compares the condition of a poor labourer's family, living in a 'miserable dwelling', to that of a family

¹ For more information, see Alison Bashford, *Purity and Pollution* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), p. 3. Mary Poovey points out that 'the sanitary idea encompassed a number of related theories, technologies, and policies'. See Mary Poovey, *Making a Social Body: British Cultural Formation, 1830-1864* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 115.

² As Peter Stallybrass and Allon White point out, '[h]owever "close" and confined the slums were, they were not confined enough. As the orifices of the poor opened to contaminate the purity of the bourgeois space [...], so in the bourgeois imagination the slums opened [...] to let forth the thief, the murderer, the prostitute and the germs'. See Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1986), p. 133.

³ Poovey points out that 'the *Report* gained an enormous readership because Chadwick, ever the entrepreneur, arranged for a simultaneous printing in quarto size and large numbers at the same time as he sent proof copies to luminaries such as Carlyle, John Stuart Mill, and Dickens, not to mention all the newspapers and quarterlies likely to run a review'. See Poovey, *Making a Social Body*, p. 117.

⁴ Bashford points out that 'sanitary reform always involved some sort of moral reform, which rested upon theories of disease which conflated physical and moral cleanliness and health, and perhaps more pertinently, physical and moral dirtiness and ill health'. She also explores the idea that 'bodies and buildings were mutually affective'. See Bashford, *Purity and Pollution*, pp. 1, 17.

living in ‘an improved cottage’.⁵ In the first dwelling, the entire family and a lodger sleep together in a single room with no window. As well as rendering the children vulnerable to disease, the squalid conditions drive the husband to the more comfortable environs of the ale house. As a result, the first family slides further into poverty and the children are raised ‘without any regard to decency of behaviour’;⁶ thus, the girls grow up to bear illegitimate children and depend on either their parents or the workhouse for a home, and the boys become drunkards and petty criminals. Unlike this family, the residents of the cottage, which boasts separate sleeping rooms and a well-kept garden, raise industrious children who, as adults, ‘shrink from idleness and immorality’.⁷ Housing reform was thus inextricably linked with a type of moral correction and sought to inaugurate the rise of an industrious working class. Mary Douglas points out that ‘[a]s we know it, dirt is essentially disorder’ and argues that ‘[e]liminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organise the environment’.⁸ As an analysis of Chadwick’s *Report* demonstrates, the cleaning up of the slums can be read as an exercise to introduce order and control amongst the chaotic bodies and homes of the poor.

However, dirt is not always associated with slovenly habits and promiscuous behaviour. Natalka Freeland explores the meanings of dirt in Elizabeth Gaskell’s social problem novels and suggests that ‘[r]ather than signifying innate criminality or moral degeneration, dirt is the expected accessory of respectable, working-class domesticity’.⁹ By contrast to the ‘respectable’ dirt of the independent labourer’s home, the state-run workhouses, which were the antithesis of the domestic cottage, invoked expectations of a

⁵ 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. 325.

⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 324-325.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 325.

⁸ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London and New York: ARK, 1996), p. 2.

⁹ Natalka Freeland, ‘The Politics of Dirt in *Mary Barton* and *Ruth*’, *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900*, 42:4 (2002), 799-818 (p. 806).

scrupulous cleanliness. The disparity between the somewhat disordered space of the private cottage and the cleanliness of the workhouse is emphasised in the sentimental poem, ‘Off to “The House”’ (1879) in *Good Words*. The poem is told from the point of view of an elderly woman to her husband and narrates the moment when, having been reduced to destitution, they leave home to live in the separate wards of the workhouse. In the final stanza, the narrator contemplates the home she is leaving and the institution that awaits her:

And now, goodbye, poor little house: I know you’re low and mean,
And the workhouse wards are big and white, and very cold and clean.¹⁰

For the narrator, the workhouse is intrinsically associated with a sterile cleanliness that marks it as an emphatically undomestic space by comparison to the small and cosy cottage. The construction of the wards as ‘cold and clean’ in this poem is typical of the representation of the workhouse in the nineteenth century: the immaculate cleanliness of the ordered wards and whitewashed walls is remarked upon in numerous workhouse narratives.

Analysis of workhouse texts reveals contradictory readings of this cleanliness: it is both an emasculating device that strips away the ‘respectable’ dirt of the working-class labourer and a necessary measure to cleanse the diseased bodies of the poor for their own good. If, as Chadwick’s *Report* argues, buildings shape the morals and health of the inhabitants, then the scrupulous cleanliness of the workhouse had an implicitly political purpose, reforming the degenerate morals of the poor and policing the health of the nation.¹¹ In this chapter, I examine the construction of the workhouse space in relation to ideas about dirt and cleanliness, and consider the social, cultural and political values attendant upon these readings.

¹⁰ Isabella Fyvie Mayo, ‘Off to “The House”’, *Good Words*, January 1879, pp. 736-737 (p. 737).

¹¹ Bashford points out that ‘[s]anitary reform was never an apolitical process, simply seeking humanely to create conditions for greater health. It was [...] fundamentally bound up with the emergence of the problem of pauperism’. See Bashford, *Purity and Pollution*, p. 3.

Sanitising Pauperism

The natural association of the poor with dirt, and their aversion to washing, is made explicit in Chadwick's *Report*.¹² As an official document that claims to be fact, the findings of the *Report* authenticated what was already a commonly held belief in nineteenth-century society: that the poor had an innate dislike of cleanliness. Evidence for the *Report* was gathered by a team of investigators who interviewed selected members of the working classes about their personal habits. The attitude of labouring men to washing is encapsulated by the words of a Lancashire Collier when asked about his personal hygiene regime: 'I never wash my body; I let my shirt rub the dirt off; my shirt will show that'.¹³ While the man's dirty shirt is for him proof of the cleanliness of his body, for the investigators it is evidence of the dirty condition of the poor.

This aversion to washing is reported to be the cause of conflict between paupers and workhouse officials, who had to ensure that newly-arrived inmates were clean before being admitted to a ward. The text states that

[w]hen it is necessary to wash them on their admission, they usually manifest an extreme repugnance to the process. Their common feeling was expressed by one of them when he declared it 'equal to robbing him of a great coat which he had had for some years'.¹⁴

Washing is represented here as a 'process' enacted upon the bodies of the poor that strips them physically of dirt and symbolically of any autonomy or respectability. The removal of this dirt, which is equated to another layer of clothing that protects and warms the body, is interpreted by the paupers as a punitive measure that reduces them to a state of naked

¹² Stallybrass and White analyse the representation of dirt and the poor in Chadwick's *Report* and draw attention to the 'metaphorical language in which filth stands in for the slum-dweller: the poor *are* pigs'. See Stallybrass and White, *Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, p. 131.

¹³ Chadwick, *Report on the Sanitary Condition*, p. 315.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 316.

vulnerability.¹⁵ The text goes on to point out that, once washed in the workhouse hospital, the health of sick paupers usually improves and that ‘the act of cleansing them is the most efficient cure’.¹⁶ Asserting that dirt is analogous to disease, the text suggests that the compulsory bathing endured by the poor has a medicinal quality that acts to purge them of illness.

The reaction of the paupers referred to in Chadwick’s *Report* suggest that they viewed being forced to wash as an intrusive and unwelcome form of discipline. In fact, cleaning and cleanliness is interpreted in many workhouse texts as an intrinsic part of the disciplinary process: the cleaning of the house was one of the main tasks given to workhouse women. The use of cleanliness as a more general disciplinary mechanism, however, is nowhere more evident than in Harriet Martineau’s fictional story ‘The Hamlets’ (1833). This text, published in the lead up to the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, promulgates the idea that, in order to purge the country of the disease of pauperism, the Elizabethan Poor Law must first be replaced by a harsher regime.¹⁷ In the narrative, a London gentleman, Mr Barry, moves his family to the seaside town of Hurst for the sake of his daughter’s health. However, after moving to the town, he discovers that the ‘curse of pauperism appeared to spread itself over the whole place’ and that, as a result, the cripplingly high poor rate threatens to bankrupt the respectable residents.¹⁸ Determining to abolish pauperism, Mr Barry takes on the role of overseer and sets out to reform the practice of indiscriminate out-door relief by replacing it

¹⁵ Seth Koven points out that baths held very different associations for different social classes and that ‘[j]ust as most of the poor loathed porridge because it reminded them of workhouse food, so too the ritual of bathing smacked of the humiliating initiation rites into the discomforts of prisons, casual wards, and night refuges’. See Seth Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (Princeton, N. J.; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 41.

¹⁶ Chadwick, *Report on the Sanitary Condition*, p. 316.

¹⁷ ‘The Hamlets’ is the second story in Harriet Martineau’s four part pro-Poor Law volume *Poor Laws and Paupers Illustrated*. For more information on Martineau’s politics, see Elaine Freedgood, ‘Banishing Panic: Harriet Martineau and the Popularization of Political Economy’, *Victorian Studies*, 39:1 (1995), 33-53.

¹⁸ Harriet Martineau, ‘The Hamlets’, *Poor Laws and Paupers Illustrated* (London: Charles Fox, 1833), p. 15.

with the offer of the workhouse.¹⁹ As well as enforced labour and a strictly controlled diet, the cleanliness of the workhouse plays a central role in making the workhouse deterrent.

In the text, the effects of this cleanliness are demonstrated by a pauper's experience of the new institution. When he is refused monetary relief by the overseer, Adams, one of the unemployed residents of Hurst, makes 'no scruple' about accepting the offer of the workhouse for himself and his wife, and his example is followed by other 'idle' residents who anticipate that it will be 'no bad lot'.²⁰ Upon setting foot in the new house, however, Adams is disconcerted by the thorough cleanliness of the entire building, in which '[n]ot a speck, or a crack, or a cobweb was to be seen along the whole range of the whitewashed walls'.²¹ Unused to the extreme cleanliness of the house, the 'well-scrubbed boards' are 'strange' to Adams's feet and the 'white deal tables' in the dining room provoke his 'wonder'.²² The heightened cleanliness of the building has a pronounced influence upon the pauper's behaviour: it is 'so long since [...he...] had been in so clean a place, that he looked round him with some degree of awe, and walked as if he trod on eggs'.²³ The 'awe'-inspiring cleanliness of the workhouse disciplines Adams into a model of self-conscious and tentative behaviour; it seems that, in this text, cleanliness is an ideological tool of control that the workhouse exerts over the poor.

The inmates of the newly deterrent workhouse are also subjected to a regime of scrupulous personal hygiene. When he first enters the workhouse, 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'.²⁴ The workhouse washing regime suggests ideas of religious and parental instruction, reminding Adams as it does of his

¹⁹ This move to abolish out-door relief reflects, of course, the aims of the 1834 Poor Law Reform.

²⁰ Martineau, 'The Hamlets', p. 36.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

childhood. In fact, the enforced personal hygiene is evocative of childhood for all the workhouse inmates as, '[t]he cleanliness and order put them in mind of Sunday; of the old Sundays, which they did not like to look back upon'.²⁵ The reluctance of the paupers to remember these 'old Sundays' suggests that they hold memories of submitting to the restraint practised on church days. The narrative implies that the workhouse assumes a type of quasi-parental responsibility over the paupers, who are reduced by these sanitary regimes to a state of childlike dependency and disempowerment. The text's subliminal message seems to be that the bodies of the poor need to be regulated by a patriarchal authority; it promulgates the ideology that, by making the individual bodies of the waywardly poor hygienic, the pauper body itself will undergo a simultaneous process of disciplining and ordering.²⁶

The propagandist agenda of the text, in favour of the reform of the Poor Law, is demonstrated by the successful elimination of pauperism from the town of Hurst. Though cleanliness is a device that dissuades the poor from remaining in the workhouse, it also implicitly functions to cleanse their moral characters: after a brief stay within the sanitary space, the workshy paupers learn self-respect and aspire to pay their own poor rates. When the empty workhouse is locked up at the end of the text, a grateful ratepayer 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.²⁷

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

²⁶ As Bashford suggests, '[t]he endless cleaning which sanitary reformers insisted upon [...] was not only about removing dirt, but about ordering things, because disorder meant disease, disorder was disease'. See Bashford, *Purity and Pollution*, p. 19. In Martineau's text, the ordering of the pauper bodies in the workhouse eventually results in the elimination of the metaphorical disease of pauperism.

²⁷ Martineau, 'The Hamlets', p. 162. In *The State of the Prisons* (1777), John Howard advocates for the reform of the prison system. His text exposes the 'deplorable' conditions suffered by eighteenth-century prisoners. John Howard, *The State of the Prisons* (1777; London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1929), p. xviii.

The ratepayer's words equate the workhouse to the prison and imply the criminalisation of poverty in Martineau's text. Couched in the language of cleanliness, the reformation of the workhouse system and the implementation of a deterrent system of poor relief are akin to a moral broom that 'sweeps' the institution clean of the metaphorical dirt of 'idleness'. The text advocates for the reform of the Poor Law and covertly equates the introduction of a new system to an act of ideological spring cleaning.

The disciplinary values attached to the cleanliness of the workhouse in Martineau's fictional story are emphasised in the apparently factual article 'Two Hours at a Union Workhouse' (1841), published in the *Penny Magazine of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge*. The narrative describes the interior of the Windsor union workhouse, pictured above the text, and sets out to dispel the prevailing idea that the institution is like the French Bastille. The narrator, who purports to be an objective enquirer, is satisfied with the general appearance of the workhouse, but acknowledges that it is possible that 'there may still be a great deal of misery though the rooms are cheerful, light, airy, clean even to a Dutch housewife's standards'.²⁸ The emphasis of this comment, however, falls upon the favourable description of the workhouse wards and thus suggests the improbability that 'misery' could be harboured in this pleasant environment. The depiction of the wards as 'rooms' that would meet the standards of the most stringent 'housewife' seeks to add a layer of domesticity to the representation of the workhouse; the text suggests that the middle-class ideal of the clean home is being cultivated in this institution for the poor.

A positive representation of the workhouse is conveyed by the description of the cheerful and well-presented inmates and, as the narrator assures readers, 'it is impossible to doubt that the most vigilant cleanliness presides over the establishment'.²⁹ That the cleanliness of the house is 'vigilant' suggests the authoritarian control implicit in the

²⁸ '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).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 398.

enforcement of the sanitary state of the house and its inmates. As in Martineau's text, ideas of parental discipline are attached to the representation of cleanliness; the workhouse is a place 'in which the physical condition of the poor is so much better looked after than in their own dwellings'.³⁰ The idea that the paupers' physical state is 'looked after' implies both the inspection of the paupers' bodies and their own relinquishment of control over their physical state of being. Although the sanitary state of the workhouse is far superior to the slum home, the narrative points out that the order of the house has a deterrent effect upon the poor; in particular, '[t]he dirty vagabond who occasionally demands the shelter and food which are offered to all [...] likes not the cleanliness and order which must accompany the satisfaction of his physical necessities'.³¹ The assumption of the text is that the poor have an innate preference for disorder and that, what middle-class readers would find 'cheerful', the poor find only 'irksome'.³²

Even at the end of the century, the poor were still innately associated with dirt. In 'Amateur Workhouse Visiting' (1893), published in *All the Year Round*, the first-person narrator reminds readers that the meanings of cleanliness are dependent upon social class: the text points out that

[j]ust what a visitor is apt to consider the strong points of a workhouse are those which the ordinary pauper dislikes most. It is well to remember that cleanliness may mean just as real misery to some people as dirt does to others.³³

Thus, the visitor acknowledges that cleanliness is read and interpreted differently by the well-to-do visitors and the paupers who are subjected to it. The narrator goes on to suggest that

[t]his innate dislike to all orderly habits undoubtedly constitutes one of a pauper's greatest miseries. The enforced cleanliness, the perpetual atmosphere of yellow soap and whitewash, that reign in a workhouse, are gross outrages on his nature.³⁴

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 397, 398.

³³ 'Amateur Workhouse Visiting', *All the Year Round*, 30 December 1893, pp. 635-642 (p. 638).

³⁴ *Ibid.*

The phrase ‘gross [outrage] on his nature’ evokes the idea of a collective pauper body that, as a class, rejects scrupulous cleanliness as unnatural. The narrator’s account, though sympathetic to the inmates, conforms to the prevailing assumption that the poor are innately dirty; as she points out, it is most likely

difficult to cheerfully conform to sanitary regulations after a long life spent in hovels, where little if any cleaning is ever attempted, and where all the refuse of years lies either on the floor, or at the best just outside the door-step.³⁵

The description of the neglected slum home, in which the residents create filth rather than clean it up, reinforces the association of the poor with dirt. In order to emphasise the attitude of the poor towards grime, the text includes an anecdotal aside about a district visitor who persuaded a slum dweller to wash her father’s dirty neck; when the visitor next returned to the home, his daughter angrily exclaimed ‘[w]hy, the poor old man have been nigh starved with the cold ever since’.³⁶ As in the account of paupers entering the workhouse in the 1842 *Report*, dirt is interpreted by the man’s daughter as an extra layer of clothing that is stripped from him by his social superiors.³⁷ Although the text cultivates sympathy for the paupers, the narrator appears complacent in her sense of superior knowledge about matters of hygiene; the narrative covertly pokes fun at the beliefs of the lower orders.

While the cleansing measures of the workhouses are represented in these texts as necessary to govern and discipline the resistant poor, other narratives draw attention to contradictory ideas associated with cleanliness. Fanny Trollope’s anti-Poor Law novel *Jessie Phillips* (1843) narrates the tragic story of a young girl who is seduced by the squire’s son and forced to seek refuge in the workhouse when she falls pregnant. The novel is set in the picturesque village of Deepbrook, in which the old parish workhouse has been superseded by

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 639.

³⁷ Koven points out that ‘[w]omen’s relationship to the circulation and removal of dirt was fundamentally determined by class. It was the prerogative of elite women to define what dirt was – and was not – and to dictate how, where, and when their social inferiors should remove it’. See Koven, *Slumming*, p. 192.

a union house. The workhouse is described in distinctly unsanitary language: it is constructed metaphorically as a ‘common sewer of misery’ which acts as a ‘drain’ for the surrounding parishes.³⁸ Yet, in contrast to this description, the physical cleanliness of the building is remarkable. Mrs Greenwood, an impoverished applicant-for-relief, awaits a meeting with the Poor Law guardians in a room which bears evidence of the rituals of cleaning: ‘[t]he walls of the room into which she was shewn were whitewashed, and it was evident, from their spotless condition, that the operation had been very recently performed’.³⁹ This room has only one window, which looks out upon upon a court, ‘the only object in which was a pump, with a cistern under it, where all the inmates of the establishment [...] performed their ablutions’.⁴⁰ The framing of the pump through the window serves to direct the gaze of the paupers (and applicants-for-relief) to this symbol of cleanliness. In this text, however, it is not the task of cleaning the house that inflicts suffering upon the inmates, but the prevention of any participation in these tasks. The paupers with whom Mrs Greenwood sits inform her that they are not allowed to help with any of the housework: all tasks are assigned to the younger women.⁴¹

In *Jessie Phillips*, the guardians’ attitudes towards applicants-for-relief are based upon how dirty the claimants look. Rather than favouring the candidates who appear to be respectable, they instead show an innate ‘partiality for dirt and degradation in those who presented themselves for parochial relief’.⁴² When Mrs Greenwood appears before the board, the guardians take offence at her neat appearance; as one says,

³⁸ Mrs Fanny Trollope, *Jessie Phillips: A Tale of the Present Day* (1843; Stroud: Nonsuch Publishing Ltd, 2006), pp. 69-70.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Later in the narrative, Jessie chooses to sit in a corner of the workhouse ward usually occupied by the washing tub. She selects this place because she wants to avoid the other inmates, but the text relates that the ‘miserably idle inmates’ are forbidden to ‘roam freely to a spot where human voices might have been heard discussing themes so interesting as soap lathers, rincing-tubs [*sic*] and drying lines’. *Ibid.*, p. 287.

⁴² *Ibid.*

‘[i]f there is one thing that I hate and abominate more than another, it is the sight of pride and poverty mixed up together. I’d fifty times rather give my vote for helping such a one as that,’ he continued, indicating a slovenly self-neglected figure, whose garments seemed to be secured by a solitary skewer....⁴³

The guardians interpret Mrs Greenwood’s respectable presentation as indicative of unseemly pride rather than of her industrious and upright nature. In being clean and well-presented, Mrs Greenwood is seen to be overstepping the social station assigned to her, one which is intrinsically associated with dirt.

Interestingly, the assumed cleanliness of a particular workhouse institution is debunked as a myth in an angry letter sent to the editor of the *Examiner* and *The Times* in 1856. The letter is written by a former pauper of the Chorlton union workhouse and, as such, gives voice to the opinion of one subjected to the regime. In particular, the writer emphasises the lack of facilities for personal hygiene in the house. As she points out, although in a ‘well-conducted workhouse it is generally supposed there is every accommodation for perfect personal cleanliness’, this ‘perfect’ cleanliness is far from usual in the Chorlton workhouse.⁴⁴ The writer asserts that there was ‘neither soap nor towel’ for the inmates to use and that they were given only a ‘dirty sheet’ to dry themselves with after bathing.⁴⁵ Not only does the workhouse fail to provide the inmates with the necessary items required for personal cleanliness, but it also lacks the basic cleaning utensils to keep the building free from dirt. The former pauper writes that ‘I cannot pass over the very poor supply of articles for cleaning, which are or were in the building. [...] No pail! no scrubbing brushes! no floor cloths!’⁴⁶

Despite the dearth of brushes and cloths, the building, on the surface at least, is scrupulously clean. As the letter points out, ‘[a]nyone visiting this place on Friday (the

⁴³ *Ibid.* p. 123.

⁴⁴ ‘The Chorlton Union Workhouse’, reprinted in the *Manchester Times*, 22 November 1856, p. [7].

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

guardians' day) would naturally say, – what a nice, clean, comfortable place it was'.⁴⁷ The narrator suggests that those people should instead 'look in about Wednesday night or Thursday morning, and witness the sore knees and aching limbs, for which there is no pity'.⁴⁸ The visitors' reading of the sanitary state of the house is thus strikingly different to the paupers' experience of the institution: the castigating and labour intensive reality of cleaning the house is hidden from the outside visitors beneath a veneer of comfort. While 'Two Hours at a Union House' suggests that the middle-class observer has a superior attitude towards cleanliness, the letter unsettles a visitor's position of authority, suggesting that their understanding of the sanitary state of the house is as superficial as the cleanliness itself.

The painful reality beneath the ostensible cleanliness of the house was recognised by Emma Sheppard, a workhouse reformer who made it her business to visit paupers and to improve the conditions in which they lived. *Sunshine in the Workhouse* (1858) is a narrative of her experiences as a workhouse visitor. In this text, Sheppard recalls that in the ward for the aged there is a 'nice boarded floor', a 'bright fire' and 'neat beds'.⁴⁹ The domesticity of these details is undercut, however, by the description of the floor as 'painfully spotless, making one almost shudder to think of daily scouring under the beds and feet of the sick and rheumatic'.⁵⁰ In the infirmary, the 'spotless' wards bear evidence of the monotonous rituals of cleaning that are carried out in the workhouse, which both disturb the bedridden inmates and potentially increase their rheumatic pain. Cleansing in Chadwick's *Report* is analogous to curing, but in this text the methodical scrubbing of the floors is suggestive of a type of unhealthy cleanliness rather than a wholesome state of order. The scrupulous cleanliness, which functions in texts such as 'The Hamlets' to discipline the waywardly able-bodied poor, seems out of place in a ward for elderly women.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Mrs G. W. Sheppard, *Sunshine in the Workhouse* (1858; London: James Nisbet and Co., no date), p. 20.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

Emma Sheppard's criticisms of the scrupulously clean wards arise out of a concern for the health and welfare of her aged pauper friends. For other workhouse visitors, however, the strange absence of identity associated with the stringent cleanliness is what makes them uneasy in the workhouse space. Though cleanliness is apparently a marker of middle-class respectability, the well-to-do visitors to the workhouse frequently remark upon the uncanny cleanliness of the space; their narratives thus indicate that this type of exaggerated cleanliness is almost as far from the reality of the middle-class home as from the homes of the poor. In the fictional narrative 'Workhouse Visiting' (1878) in the *Monthly Packet*, for example, the rigid order and immaculate cleanliness render the institution disconcerting for the middle-class visitor, Miss Meldon. Describing her first visit to Ellsborough workhouse, Miss Meldon relates how she was met by 'a distant sound of scrubbing, the s-swish of water thrown down [...], a smell (this seems quite inseparable from a workhouse) of hot soap and water'.⁵¹ The rhythmic sounds of scrubbing and the smell of soap indicate the cleaning tasks being carried out by unseen paupers. For this middle-class visitor then, the sounds and smells of cleaning pervading the building are what signals most clearly that she is in a workhouse. The workhouse interior also bears evidence of repetitious cleaning rituals; the women's ward is 'what would be called "scrupulously" clean; there were bare shining boards, spotless white-washed walls, and tidy blue coverlets on every bed'.⁵² The rigid ordering of the workhouse space suggests an attempt to regulate the bodies of the paupers; this 'scrupulous' cleanliness results in the effacement of all traces of the inmates' former selves and becomes indicative of an eerie and unnatural washing away of identity.⁵³

⁵¹ [Caroline M. Hallett?], 'Workhouse Visiting', *Monthly Packet of Evening Readings for Members of the English Church*, 1 February 1878, pp. 164-177 (p. 170). The first three chapters of this serialised narrative were published together in February 1878. The subsequent three chapters were published in July, August and September 1880.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 170-171.

⁵³ This effacement of individuality is seen again in the article 'The Sorting of Paupers' (1892) in the *English Illustrated Magazine*. There is a sense of excess connected to cleanliness in this text: '[i]nside and out [...the house...] gleams with cleanliness. The windows – there are rows and rows of them all just alike – are simply appalling in their brilliancy; and so are the long white walls which seem to catch each ray of sunlight as it falls

In the earlier narrative ‘Another Workhouse Probe’ (1867), a piece of investigative journalism published in *All the Year Round*, the narrator’s account of the workhouse cleanliness is even more sinister. The visitor-narrator is disorientated when he is confronted by ‘white and spotless’ floor and ‘[w]alls without so much as a fly-spot to break their uniformity’.⁵⁴ The oppressive cleanliness of the workhouse has a nerve-tingling effect upon the visitor, who asserts that, ‘the elaborate cleanliness and bare neatness of this long chamber jar upon one as much as if it were a living tomb’.⁵⁵ The severe cleanliness of the building is just as strange to this middle-class visitor as it is to the pauper Adams in Martineau’s ‘The Hamlets’ and has a similarly physical effect upon him. Surveying the endless wards of whitewash becomes a literally painful experience for the visitor, whose nerves ‘jar’ and eyes ‘ache’ when he ‘note[s] the comfortless cleanliness of the chilly chamber’.⁵⁶ A macabre comparison is drawn in the text between the ‘bare neatness’ of the wards and a crypt that is inhabited by the half dead; the narrator suggests that there is less evidence of human life in these wards, than in ‘a row of trestles upon which corpses were to rest’.⁵⁷ By contrast to the visitor’s praise of the institutional workhouse cleanliness in ‘Two Hours at a Union House’, the visitor in ‘Another Workhouse Probe’ is disturbed, both mentally and physically, by the eerie sterility of the workhouse.

In ‘The Workhouse from the Inside’ (1899), published in the *Contemporary Review*, a former workhouse infirmary nurse seeks to explain the seeming cruelty of this institutional cleanliness. The article responds to a text entitled ‘Within Workhouse Walls’, in which the

and give to it an almost cruel intensity’. The description of the paupers in the house bears a curious similarity to the identical windows: ‘[t]he gowns and caps of the women are without spot or blemish, and on all sides are neatness and order’. Like the exterior architecture of the house, the women too are scrubbed clean of ‘spot or blemish’. See Edith Sellers, ‘The Sorting of Paupers’, *English Illustrated Magazine*, January 1892, pp. 332-336 (p. 332).

⁵⁴ [J. C. Parkinson], ‘Another Workhouse Probe’, *All the Year Round*, 7 December 1867, pp. 558-564 (p. 561).

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 562-563.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 563.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

subjection of the elderly inmates to a system of punitive discipline is criticised.⁵⁸ The former nurse puts across the perspective of the paid employees of the workhouse, who are confronted daily by ‘the deepest depths of human poverty and degradation, dirt and disease’.⁵⁹ The disgusting state that paupers sometimes appear in is illustrated by an anecdote about a pauper who, though a ‘clean and tidy woman’ in the workhouse, returned to living in a state of squalor when she discharged herself.⁶⁰ Unwilling to submit to the ‘wholesome discipline’ of service, she slept rough, became ‘infested with vermin’ and ‘allowed the flies their loathsome work’.⁶¹ On her return to the house she was in such a filthy state that ‘[i]t was necessary to give [...her...] six baths of clean water before she was fit to be rolled in blankets and taken to the infirmary!’⁶² The dirty state of the woman suggests, to the nurse, the pauper’s inability to take care of her body or her health; thus, in her re-admittance to the workhouse, the woman is reduced to a childlike state of dependency, bathed and dried by the workhouse officials. Attempting to convey to readers the difficulties implicit in managing a workhouse infirmary, the narrator points out that ‘[a]ll the refuse of the hospitals falls to the share of workhouse attendants; to them are brought for cleansing the most degraded of human beings’.⁶³ The term ‘degraded’ suggests that the ‘cleansing’ of the paupers refers to a moral sanitation as well as a bodily one; the text demonstrates that, as in Chadwick’s *Report* almost sixty years earlier, the concepts of disease and morality were still entwined at the end of the century.

⁵⁸ See Virginia M. Crawford, ‘Within Workhouse Walls’, *Contemporary Review*, June 1899, pp. 831-842 (pp. 833-834).

⁵⁹ Edith M. Shaw, ‘The Workhouse from the Inside’, *Contemporary Review*, October 1899, pp. 564-572 (p. 564).

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 565.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.* Kevin P. Siena suggests that ‘workhouse infirmaries became the primary medical institutions for the very poor in London from early in the eighteenth century, long before the well-known reforms of 1834’. See Kevin P. Siena, *Venereal Disease, Hospitals and the Urban Poor: London’s ‘Foul Wards,’ 1600-1800* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2004), p. 136.

The narrator of ‘The Workhouse from the Inside’ also draws attention to the physical demands attached to caring for the paupers in a workhouse infirmary; the aged inmates are ‘literally children over again, *plus* all the evil habits, thoughts, and inclinations gathered during sixty years of life’ and the task of keeping a fully grown pauper clean is ‘perfectly horrible’.⁶⁴ The narrator explains that the aged paupers have a tendency to hoard their belongings and that, if the effluvia that they secrete around their beds were not removed, it would quickly become a ‘foul-smelling mass’.⁶⁵ It is this tendency of the aged to indulge in unsanitary practices like these that, the text reveals, ‘account[s] somewhat for what seems the rigid discipline of the workhouse, the warm bath once a month, and the lack of privacy which so many outside our walls think unnecessary and barbarous’.⁶⁶ The ‘vigilance’ of the nurses is represented, not as deliberate cruelty, but as a necessary measure to prevent the spread of vermin. The misconception of the workhouse regime is emphasised by the narrator’s anecdote about how ‘[a] friend of [...a former inmate...] came with a very long face and asked if it were true that every aged person was forced into a cold bath every morning’.⁶⁷ The rumour regarding bathing suggests that cleanliness remained an intrinsic part of the popular perception of workhouses throughout the nineteenth century and retained its attendant meanings of discipline and cruelty.

Detecting Dirt

From the mid-nineteenth century, increasing concerns about sanitation and the controlled conditions needed for health meant that institutions for the poor became the subject of intense debate, forcing the public to reconsider how clean and ordered workhouses really were. The

⁶⁴ Shaw, ‘The Workhouse from the Inside’, p. 569.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 570.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

death of Timothy Daly in December 1864, and of Richard Gibson soon after, as a result of the poor standard of care in workhouse infirmaries, sparked campaigns to expose the treatment of the sick poor in workhouses.⁶⁸ In light of these scandalous cases of neglect, the *Lancet* 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’.⁶⁹ For the *Lancet*, the deaths of these paupers were merely a symptom of the abysmal standard of care in workhouse infirmaries: as the article asserts, ‘[n]o one can pretend that the cases are entirely exceptional’.⁷⁰ The announcement declares that the intention of the Sanitary Commissioners is not only to report upon the state of the infirmaries, but also to ‘secure data’ that will help to improve the institutions.⁷¹

In the first report of the Sanitary Commissioners, the text suggests 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’.⁷² In terms of sanitation, the London workhouses demonstrate the lack of a standardised system of care across Poor Law workhouses; by contrast to the City of London union workhouse, which is described as having ‘almost every sanitary requirement’, in the workhouse of St George-

⁶⁸ The cases of Daly and Gibson were widely reported in the press and their deaths attributed to neglectful treatment in the Holborn and St Giles’s union workhouses respectively. Daly, in particular, is described in reports in *The Times* as being ‘a strong man when he went into the workhouse’ suffering from rheumatism. The inattention of the infirmary nurses resulted in him developing large bedsores which caused his death. See ‘The Holborn Union’, *The Times*, 28 December 1864, p. 10. Gibson was admitted into the workhouse infirmary with a sore on his leg; he was here ‘inhumanly neglected’ and ‘insufficiently supplied with the diet and stimulants which his condition required’. See ‘The sad story of poor RICHARD GIBSON’, *The Times*, 18 May 1865, p. 11.

⁶⁹ ‘The Lancet’ Commission to Inquire into the State of Workhouse Hospitals’, *Lancet*, 15 April 1865, p. 410.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² ‘The Lancet Sanitary Commission for Investigating the State of the Infirmaries of Workhouses: Reports of the Commissioners; No. 1. [sic]; Metropolitan Infirmaries’, *Lancet*, 1 July 1865, pp. 14-22 (p. 14). Analysing representations of dirt in the metropolis, Pamela K. Gilbert suggests that the ‘scandal of filth in the heart of the modern city is an actual scandal, covered in the papers almost daily, of the uncivilised, grotesque, leaky body persisting in the midst of managed civilisation’. See 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 and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), pp. 78-102 (p. 80).

the-Martyr, ‘almost all these desiderata are wanting’.⁷³ This report, and all following ones, attempt to objectively detail the conditions of workhouse infirmaries and to follow ‘a strict plan’ as to how the observations are reported.⁷⁴ In these texts, there is a sense of the Sanitary Commissioners hunting for hidden dirt and seeking out filth in a detective-like manner.

The *Lancet* reports emphasise the unhygienic standards of most of the infirmaries visited. Collectively, they challenge the public perception, promulgated by other narratives, that workhouses are characterised by a scrupulous attention to cleanliness. In the first report, the narrator asserts that

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 air of soap-and-water, about the wards of workhouse infirmaries. So much for the surface; now for the inside of the cup and platter.⁷⁵

Though the report acknowledges that the prevailing representation of workhouses in the mid-nineteenth century is one of ‘bescrubbedness’, it aims to demonstrate that this apparent cleanliness is only a veneer that hides a dirtier reality; unlike unofficial visitors, the Sanitary Commissioners are not ‘superficial observers’ and 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 subsequent reports detail the (un)sanitary state of individual workhouses. The Commissioners inspect the often disgusting sheets, towels and mattresses, peer into the privies and pass judgement upon the nursing arrangements. In particular, the report upon the infirmary of the St Leonard’s workhouse at Shoreditch emphasises the importance of looking beneath the

⁷³ ‘No. 1. [*sic*]; Metropolitan Infirmaries’, p. 14.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 15. The comments of the Commissioners are set out in the first report under eight sections: ‘I. The general character of the infirmary building [...] II. The wards [...] III. The system of nursing IV. The qualities of the provisions and the manner of cooking. V. The dietaries. VI. The medical officer [...]. VII. The history of any epidemic diseases [...]. VIII. The mortality [...]’. *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

surface. On the face of it, the ‘shell is good’, but beneath that the ‘kernel is rotten’.⁷⁶ It is alleged that, in this workhouse, numerous ‘scandals [...] exist here under the surface’;⁷⁷ when examining the bed linen of the house, the Commissioners find that

[t]he outer surface of the beds 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 crusted blood and discharges, and in the sick wards also they were far from being well kept.⁷⁸

In addition to the filthy sheets, the Sanitary Commissioners discover bedbound patients with infected bedsores, a neglectful and disorganised system of pauper nursing, and a total lack of any comforts for the sick.

The reports self-consciously distance themselves from a discourse of sensationalism. The first article asserts that the Commissioners seek to furnish readers with ‘the naked facts’ and later, on the subject of pauper nurses, that ‘[w]e have no wish to make “sensation” statements’.⁷⁹ However, the descriptions of the individual workhouses, which are characterised by neglect, dirt, inadequate building design and bad management, seem inevitably to employ a vocabulary of sensation; after all, readers will be ‘startled’ by the revelations about the cleanliness of the wards and the Commissioners themselves have been ‘fairly horrified’.⁸⁰ The ‘cup and platter’ comment above is followed by the revelation that, in many infirmaries, ‘the bedridden patients habitually washed their hands and faces *in their chamber utensils*’.⁸¹ Specifically, the text is referring to the Chelsea infirmary and claims that, in this workhouse, the unclean washing practice was ‘the climax to the horrors of a

⁷⁶ ‘The Lancet Sanitary Commission for Investigating the State of the Infirmaries of Workhouses. Reports of the Commissioners. No. III. [*sic*] Metropolitan Infirmaries. St Leonard’s, Shoreditch.’, *Lancet*, 29 July 1865, pp. 131-134 (p. 132). Though the board of guardians, the master, and the medical officer show ‘much goodwill and openness’, the Commissioners are forced to condemn the infirmary as ‘a terrible failure, and the whole state of things in it disgraceful to the parish and to the country’. *Ibid.*, pp. 131-132.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ ‘Reports of the Commissioners; No. 1. [*sic*]; Metropolitan Infirmaries’, pp. 17, 19.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

female *itch-ward*, which was the nastiest place altogether that our eyes ever looked upon'.⁸² Coupled with the melodramatic language, the use of italics suggests the Commissioners' stated aim to 'direct' readers' attention to the violation of proper sanitary guidelines and to elicit from them an appropriate level of shock at their contravention. As well as incorporating a sensational vocabulary, the texts occasionally hint that not everything witnessed by the inspectors is included in the report; on the subject of the Rotherhithe infirmary, the text states that '[a]s for the sanitary accommodations for this part of the population, they are disgraceful, and such as cannot with decency be fully commented on'.⁸³ By contrast to the intended aim to give readers the 'naked facts', this comment suggests that the dirt of the workhouse infirmary is too shocking to be reported in print, even by a medical journal.

The subject of workhouse infirmaries was also discussed in more popular magazines. For example, the article 'Ill in a Workhouse' (1865), published in *All the Year Round*, engages with contemporary debates about the condition of the sick poor in workhouses. Like the reports of the *Lancet* Commissioners, which were published from July that year, the article attacks the conditions of workhouse infirmaries.⁸⁴ As in the *Lancet*, the article points out that 'the occasional external cleanliness [of the workhouse] is the cleanliness of a whited sepulchre'.⁸⁵ Far from being analogous to good health, the cleanliness of the workhouse is as conducive to health as that of a morgue.⁸⁶ Despite the suggestion in Chadwick's *Report* that 'cleansing [...] is the most efficient cure' for illness, the article asserts that, in reality, the

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ 'The Lancet Sanitary Commission for Investigating the State of the Infirmaries of Workhouses. Reports of the Commissioners. Metropolitan Infirmaries. No. VII. Camberwell and Rotherhithe', *Lancet*, 23 September 1865, pp. 355-357 (p. 356).

⁸⁴ The text emphasises the shortfalls of the workhouse infirmaries when compared to voluntary hospitals: whereas patients in voluntary hospitals are allotted 1, 300 to 2, 000 cubic feet of space, the workhouse infirmaries allow only a minimum of five hundred cubic feet of air per patient. See 'Ill in a Workhouse', *All the Year Round*, 16 September 1865, pp.176-179 (p. 176). Bashford points out that '[d]eveloping scientific formulae about airflow and cubic space per person was a major concern of sanitarians, designers and physicians in the mid-nineteenth century'. See Bashford, *Purity and Pollution*, p. 5.

⁸⁵ 'Ill in a Workhouse', p. 179.

⁸⁶ The workhouse paupers who are well suffer from the 'noisome smells, the confined atmosphere, the unscientific diet, and the intolerable monotony'. *Ibid.*

patients breathing in the poisonous atmosphere of the workhouse infirmary will ‘never get well, not even if they are kept tolerably clean’.⁸⁷ Far from recovering their health, the text argues that a stay in the workhouse will only lead to long-term affliction; when a family go into the workhouse, their children exchange

the comparatively wholesome dirt of the street and the gutter, for the confinement and the unwholesome dirt of a place from which they at last emerge, verminous and bleary-eyed, with stupid faces, cadaverous skins, and shambling walk, unwilling to labour, unable to learn, and only fit, paupers themselves, to be the parents of paupers like unto them.⁸⁸

According to this text, the dirt of the gutter is a far healthier choice for the poor than the workhouse infirmary; instead of curing patients, a stay in the infirmary is conversely shown to instil in them the hereditary disease of pauperism.⁸⁹

In 1867, the Metropolitan Poor Act was passed, which sought to improve metropolitan workhouse infirmaries and to build new ones.⁹⁰ The attention of the *Lancet* Commissioners thus shifted to workhouses outside of London and, in the autumn of 1867, the *Lancet* began to publish reports upon the infirmaries of country workhouses. As in the descriptions of the metropolitan workhouses, these articles uncover similar levels of dirt, neglect and unsatisfactory levels of sanitation in their country counterparts. Once again, ostensible cleanliness is shown to mask disorder; after the Commissioners asked an elderly inmate of the West Ham workhouse where he stored his cutlery, they turned over his pillow to

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 179.

⁸⁹ In 1867, *All the Year Round* published three articles of investigative journalism about the workhouses. In the first article ‘A Workhouse Probe’, the narrator informs readers that he is accompanying the Lancet Sanitary Commission on their ‘errand of humanity’. These articles thus brought the specialised reports of the *Lancet* to the attention of a wider readership. See [J. C. Parkinson], ‘A Workhouse Probe’, *All the Year Round*, 30 November 1867, pp. 541-545 (p. 541). I discuss these texts in chapter three.

⁹⁰ For more information, see Geoffrey Rivett, *The Development of the London Hospital System, 1823 – 1982: The Poor Law Infirmaries*. Available online at http://www.nhshistory.net/poor_law_infirmaries.htm [date accessed 11 May 2012].

[discover] the following list of articles, which would be amusing did they not lead to filth and vermin – namely, his knife and fork, a piece of soap, his hair-comb, a quarter of a pound of sugar, a piece of bread, some butter, a cabbage-leaf with fruit, a towel, and several articles of clothing.⁹¹

This method of storing personal items is common throughout the infirmaries in the *Lancet* reports and one of the unclean practices that the infirmary nurse will later refer to in ‘The Workhouse from the Inside’. In another report, this time upon the Walsall workhouse, it is claimed that this untidiness renders the more admirable points of the infirmary useless: ‘[t]he comfort of a roomy bedstead and of a well filled bed is soon destroyed when bread and salt, spoons and spectacles, and a host of other things are put beneath the bolster’.⁹² Although there is an outward show of cleanliness in the Walsall workhouse – the female wards are ‘scrupulously clean and tidy-looking’ – the report upon this particular workhouse is in fact one of the most damning in terms of its suitability for nursing patients back to health.⁹³ Similarly to the first report upon the metropolitan workhouses, the close of this article asserts that ‘the Walsall Workhouse presents an example of cleanliness and order calculated to deceive a superficial observer’.⁹⁴ Outer cleanliness is again shown to mask a more ingrained layer of dirt and disorder hidden beneath the surface; not only is cleanliness superficial, but this report suggests that it is intentionally deceptive.

Of all the *Lancet* reports, however, the exposé of the conditions inside the infamous Farnham workhouse is perhaps the most shocking. The opening announcement that ‘[t]his report will, we fear, be a “sensational” one’, is an apology for the revelations to come, and the text later reiterates that ‘[t]he materials for writing a melodramatic story are furnished in

⁹¹ ‘The Lancet Sanitary Commission for Investigating the State of the Infirmaries of Workhouses. Country Workhouse Infirmaries. No. II. West Ham Workhouse.’, *Lancet*, 5 October 1867, pp. 433-434 (p. 434).

⁹² ‘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. 585).

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 586.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

abundance by the bare facts of the history of Farnham Workhouse'.⁹⁵ Like many other workhouses, the wards are reported as being dirty, the ventilation poor and the facilities for washing inadequate. Maybe it is the inclusion of the horrible fate of one of the paupers, however, that makes this report so memorable. The text relates how an epileptic pauper ordered to clean out the cess pit by the master suffered another attack, 'fell into the liquid sludge, [and] was pulled out three parts drowned'.⁹⁶ The pauper's submergence in the cess pit seems to be an exemplification (albeit an exaggerated one) of the literal threat posed by the dirt of the institution.

Although the *Lancet* reports are ostensibly couched in the discourse of scientific investigation, they also demonstrate an implicit concern about moral contagion. The 'most objectionable feature' of the Wolverhampton workhouse is not the dirtiness of the inmates, the overcrowding of the wards, or even the presence of itch in the workhouse school, but the centrally-located kitchen. This room is 'small, dark, and the centre of workhouse gossip'.⁹⁷ Cramped and unlit, the kitchen provides the optimum conditions needed for the spread of disease; from here, food is carried through the house and across a 'dirty yard' to the infectious, imbecile and sick wards.⁹⁸ The text suggests that this 'traffic is most objectionable, as it keeps up a constant communication between the patients and inmates of every portion of the house'.⁹⁹ At the same time as suggesting the potential for the physical spread of disease, the *Lancet* report also seems to invoke ideas of moral contamination. The kitchen, in which paupers gather and 'gossip', is a space which has connotations of female idleness; the immorality of these gossiping paupers is then disseminated around the

⁹⁵ 'The Lancet Sanitary Commission for Investigating the State of the Infirmaries of Workhouses. Country Workhouse Infirmaries. No. III. Farnham (Near Aldershot).', *Lancet*, 19 October 1867, pp. 496-498 (pp. 496, 497).

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 497.

⁹⁷ 'The Lancet Sanitary Commission for Investigating the State of the Infirmaries of Workhouses. Country Workhouse Infirmaries. No. IV. Wolverhampton Workhouse, Staffordshire.', *Lancet*, 2 November 1867, pp. 555-556 (p. 556).

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

institution as they deliver food to the various wards. For a moment, at least, this objective, scientific journal seems to slip into the realms of morality.

In 1869, the St Pancras workhouse infirmary became the subject of a public scandal. The deaths of seven paupers in this institution were blamed upon ‘the overcrowded state of the wards and the impure atmosphere’.¹⁰⁰ The overpopulation of the wards had been condemned in the 1865 *Lancet* report, which states that ‘by a gross abuse it has become the practice to allow great overcrowding in the winter months, so much so that some wards have been spread with beds for patients’.¹⁰¹ The subsequent deaths were a realisation of the *Lancet*’s warnings about the dangers of poor ventilation and insufficient amount of cubic space per patient. The scandal of the St Pancras infirmary is commented upon by *Fun* (1869) in a short, scathing article. This text condemns the ‘unwholesome’ wards and the attitudes of the guardians, whom it accuses of attempting to shift the blame away from themselves;¹⁰² it satirically states, ‘[of] course the Coroner got up the case, and, of course the two Medical Inspectors had interested motives in reporting, and, of course, the paupers were prevailed upon to die in order to further their aims’.¹⁰³ The suggestion that the infirmary is comparable to ‘the horrors of the Black Hole of Calcutta’ is visualised in the accompanying illustration, ‘Poor House or Pest House: Or, the Modern Black Hole’ (fig. 1) which is, the bracketed subtitle reads, ‘Dedicated to the St Pancras Board of Guardians’.¹⁰⁴ The illustration is an exaggerated visual representation of the foetid and overcrowded conditions that paupers are subjected to in the workhouse infirmary; paupers of all ages and both sexes are depicted crammed together in a dark cellar beneath the surface of the ground. In the image, a woman

¹⁰⁰ ‘The State of St. Pancras Workhouse Infirmary’, *Daily News*, 11 November 1869, p. 2.

¹⁰¹ ‘The Lancet Sanitary Commission for Investigating the State of the Infirmarys of Workhouses. Reports of the Commissioners; Metropolitan Infirmarys. No. IX. St. Pancras and St. Marylebone’, *Lancet*, 23 December 1865, pp. 711-714 (p. 712).

¹⁰² ‘The parish of St. Pancras is acquiring a terrible and unenviable notoriety [...]’, *Fun*, 27 November 1869, p. 116.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

and child look on helplessly as a man dies, while another man clutches his hair in anguish. In the right-hand corner of the picture lurk two rats, symbolic of pestilence, one of which appears to be nibbling at the dying man's foot.¹⁰⁵ Centralised at the top of the image is a sneering guardian who surveys the imprisoned paupers through barred windows and whose demeanour implies not just an unconscious neglect of the paupers, but a deliberate and calculated cruelty. The picture is a visual exposé of the filthy underside of 'civilised London' and the amorality of the so-called guardians.¹⁰⁶

In Anne Thackeray-Ritchie's fictional novella, *Jack the Giant Killer* (published in three parts in the *Cornhill Magazine* 1867-1868), the ostensible cleanliness of the workhouse is again shown to be a façade. Davy Hopkins, a former inmate of the Hammersmith workhouse, is found by Jack, a country curate, lying in a field and close to death. Explaining to Jack the next day that he has left the workhouse for good, he claims that, 'I'd rather die in the ditch any day than go back to that d— place'.¹⁰⁷ In answer to Jack's protest that '[it] looked clean and comfortable enough', Davy exclaims, '[c]lean, comfirble! [*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.'¹⁰⁸ As in the factual reports of the *Lancet*, Thackeray-Ritchie's narrative suggests that a very different state of affairs lurks beneath the exterior cleanliness noted by visitors.

Jack subsequently takes up the post of chaplain at the Hammersmith workhouse, believing that '[n]ew brooms sweep clean' and hoping to improve conditions for the

¹⁰⁵ Peter Stallybrass and Allon White write on the new significance of the rat in the nineteenth century in relation to theories about sanitation: '[a]s the connections between physical and moral hygiene were developed and redeployed, there was a new attention to the purveyors of moral "dirt". The rat was no longer primarily an economic liability [...]: it was the object of fear and loathing, a threat to civilised life'. See Stallybrass and White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*, p. 143.

¹⁰⁶ 'The parish of St. Pancras', p. 116.

¹⁰⁷ Anne Thackeray-Ritchie, *Jack the Giant Killer* (1867; Boston: Loring, 1868), p. 21.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

paupers.¹⁰⁹ However, before Jack manages to address any of the corruptions of the house, he is poisoned by the distress of the paupers and the atmosphere of neglect: ‘the sights, the smells, the depression of spirits produced by this vast suffering mass of his unlucky brothers and sisters, was too much for him, and for a couple of days he took to his bed’.¹¹⁰ While the *Lancet* reports draw attention to the risk of disease posed to the pauper body by the workhouse, this text suggests the debilitating effects of the workhouse system upon even the mind and body of the respectable middle-class curate: dirt and disease are shown to affect the ‘immoral’ poor and the ‘moral’ middle class alike. The sanitary conditions of this fictional workhouse are particularly distasteful; the tap water is ‘murky’-looking and, when the matron spots Jack drinking it, she exclaims in horror that ‘the tap-water comes through the cesspool and is as nasty as nasty can be’.¹¹¹ This revelation implicitly recalls the instance of the Farnham pauper who fell into the cess pit and swallowed the liquid sludge; the idea of the paupers forced to imbibe liquid from the cess pit is a nauseating escalation of the incident in the *Lancet* report that plays upon popular rumours about the poisonous diets of paupers.¹¹² As well as living in dirt, the paupers of the Hammersmith workhouse are also forced to consume it.

Contaminating Casual Wards

Attached to the workhouse proper were wards that catered for the transient poor. Known as casual wards, these shelters provided overnight accommodation for vagrants and itinerant

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 23. The corruption of the house is represented in metaphorical terms of dirt and dust; Jack is cautious about implementing his schemes and does not begin to ‘sweep’ for a week as he fears that he might ‘stir up the dust, which had been lying so thickly, and make matters worse than before’. *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² Writing on the introduction of the 1834 Poor Law, Norman Longmate points out that ‘[t]he substitution of bread for allowances of money [...] led to the rumour that it had been poisoned to reduce the population’. See Norman Longmate, *The Workhouse* (London: Temple Smith, 1974), p. 73.

workers who, after a disciplinary stint of stone-breaking or oakum-picking the next morning, would then move on to another town.¹¹³ One of the most well-known of Victorian paintings of poverty depicts a scene outside a casual ward: Luke Fildes's *Applicants for Admission to a Casual Ward* (1874) pictures a line of impoverished people queuing up outside the door of a workhouse casual ward and serves as a comment upon the callous treatment of the poor by the state.¹¹⁴ By contrast to the 'superficial' air of cleanliness that is shown to conceal dirt in the *Lancet* reports, the squalor of the casual wards was evident to even the most blinkered observer; boards of guardians seemed to make very little effort to disguise the foetid state of their casual wards, even when the rest of the workhouse was ritually scrubbed clean. Rather than deterring the poor with cleanliness, many of these, intended for the most hated class of the poor, appear to have operated on a different ideology, instead dissuading the poor with dirt.

In 'Destitution in the Metropolis' (1848), published in the *London Journal*, the text condemns the Lord Mayor for holding an opulent ball in aid of 'the Literary Association of the friends of Poland', but refusing to contribute to a soup kitchen for the starving London poor.¹¹⁵ The narrative includes an account by Mr Cochrane, the chairman of the Poor Man's Guardian Society, of his inspections of night shelters for poor. In the text, Cochrane describes visiting the workhouse casual ward on Gray's Inn lane and being shown down flights of stairs to a dark underground room in which so many men are crammed that 'it appeared a question,

¹¹³ An image in the *Illustrated London News*, 'Sketches in a Casual Ward', depicts for the reader various stages of a night in one of these shelters. The vignettes include the queue for admission, the washing room, the sleeping quarters, the disinfectant room and the task of stone-breaking being performed. See 'A Casual Ward', *Illustrated London News*, 19 November 1887, pp. 585-586 (p. 586).

¹¹⁴ The painting is based upon an earlier engraving by Fildes. See Luke Fildes, 'Houseless and Hungry', *Graphic*, 4 December 1869, p. 9. The painting appeared with a caption taken from Dickens's description of paupers outside Whitechapel workhouse in 1855: 'Dumb, wet, silent horrors[,] [...] sphinxes set up against that dead wall, and no one likely to be at the pains of solving them until the General Overthrow'. Quotation in John Forster, *The Life of Dickens*, Vol II., 1847-1870 (London: Chapman and Hall, no date), p. 94.

¹¹⁵ 'Destitution in the Metropolis', *London Journal*, 26 February 1848, pp. 412-413 (p. 412).

almost, whether there would be room for them all to lie down'.¹¹⁶ Having looked around the room, he somewhat self-importantly addresses a group of men lying together:

Now, my friends, I have come to 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?¹¹⁷

The text's description of the casual ward slips into the realms of morality as the narrator relates that, on their acquiescence, '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'.¹¹⁸ The visitor is repulsed by the sight of the naked men lying together for warmth and comments that '[i]t was impossible not to feel a deep [sense of disgust]'.¹¹⁹ Though the men reveal that they sleep naked so that they can easily 'wipe off the vermin' that infest the rugs, the narrator's reaction suggests his unspoken suspicion that homosexual relations might occur between the men.¹²⁰ The condemnation of the casual wards for 'sanctioning and encouraging the disgusting practice of the male poor sleeping naked together in bed', implies that the visitor's wish to inaugurate improvements manifests from a desire to police moral boundaries amongst the poor.¹²¹ The sleeping men are given visual expression in one of six vignettes. In the image (fig. 2), 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; in this text, the dirt of the casual ward promulgates the subversive sleeping arrangements.

In 1866, James Greenwood's narrative, 'A Night in a Workhouse', transformed the foetid conditions of the casual wards into a sensational story and a national concern.¹²² The

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 412-413.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 413.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² Koven provides an in-depth analysis of the significance, history and legacy of 'A Night in a Workhouse'. He points out that, while 'the *Lancet*'s articles failed to capture the imagination of the broader public', they caught the attention of Frederick Greenwood (editor of the *Pall Mall Gazette* and brother of James Greenwood) who

three-part narrative, published under the pseudonym of the ‘Amateur Casual’ in the *Pall Mall Gazette*, describes how Greenwood disguised himself with ‘every sign of squalor’ and spent the night undercover in the casual ward of the Lambeth workhouse.¹²³ The accounts generated a media storm, scandalising the public with the descriptions of filth, degradation and nakedness that Greenwood claimed to have witnessed.¹²⁴ In the first instalment, he describes being led through the passages, which were ‘all so scrupulously clean that my most serious misgivings were laid to rest’.¹²⁵ Greenwood was wrong to be complacent. For readers, the most memorable (and cringe-worthy) moment of the narrative is the depiction of the bath filled with ‘a liquid [...] disgustingly like weak mutton broth’ in which Greenwood immerses himself before being shown to the sleeping wards.¹²⁶ The description of the bath became infamous in popular discourse and a byword for the disgusting conditions of casual wards.¹²⁷ In this text, the casual ward is a den so filthy that Greenwood claims to have difficulty in finding the words to represent it. The claustrophobic space of the ward is ‘roofed with naked tiles which were furred with the damp and filth that reeked within’ and the stone floor is so ‘thickly encrusted with filth that I mistook it first for a floor of natural earth’.¹²⁸ While the ‘naked’ and ‘furred’ description of the ward lends the building anthropomorphic qualities and collapses the divide between building and animal, Greenwood’s mistaking of the floor for ‘natural earth’ suggests a blurring of yet another boundary: that of interior and exterior. The

‘believed that the *Lancet* had hit upon a story he could transform into a media sensation’. See Koven, *Slumming*, p. 25.

¹²³ [James Greenwood], ‘A Night in a Workhouse’, *Pall Mall Gazette*, 12 January 1866, pp. 9-10 (p. 9). The following parts were published on 13 and 15 January 1866.

¹²⁴ Koven’s analysis of this narrative focuses upon the erotic subtext of homosexuality; he also explores the numerous spin-offs of Greenwood’s account which followed ‘A Night’. See *Slumming*, pp. 25-87. Jim Davis has paid particular attention to the theatrical versions of ‘A Night’ that were performed. See Jim Davis, ‘A Night in the Workhouse, or The Poor Laws as Sensation Drama’, *Essays in Theatre*, 7:2 (1989), 111-126.

¹²⁵ [Greenwood], ‘A Night in a Workhouse’, p. 10.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

¹²⁷ Koven analyses the significance of the bath, suggesting that, as well as commenting upon the meatless diets of paupers, it also suggests the failure of the workhouse system as a whole: ‘the bath like the workhouse itself, fails miserably to perform its task. Instead 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’. See Koven, *Slumming*, p. 39.

¹²⁸ ‘A Night in a Workhouse’, p. 10.

casual ward is thus constructed in the text as a subversive space liable to collapse all binary oppositions.

The loathsome nature of the ward is matched only by the text's construction of the moral filthiness of the men who populate it. The men themselves are described as using foul language, singing offensive songs, spitting and showing a propensity towards violence. The subliminal homoerotic suggestions of the casual ward in 'Destitution in the Metropolis' are much more explicit in Greenwood's narrative; as in the ward investigated by Cochrane, in the Lambeth ward 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 in the text as evidence of homosexual intercourse.¹²⁹ The homoerotic energies of the text are focalised upon the figure of Kay, a young boy who enters the ward in the middle of the night; similarly to the pictorial representation of the men in 'Destitution in the Metropolis', the description of Kay, with 'soft and silky' hair, 'large blue eyes' and a voice as 'soft and sweet as any woman's', is couched in the language of femininity.¹³⁰ When more casuals enter the ward, Greenwood is gripped by horror at the thought of having to share his sleeping place with 'some dirty scoundrel of the Kay breed'.¹³¹ The homoerotic undertones of the text, together with the sensationalising of dirt, brought casual wards into the public eye and transformed them into a scandal that gripped the country.

Inspired by Greenwood's success, J. H. Stallard, a Poor-Law reformer, employed a woman to conduct a similar undercover investigation in the women's side of the casual wards.¹³² In the introduction to *The Female Casual and her Lodging* (1866), Stallard explains

¹²⁹ *Ibid.* Greenwood's experiences in the workhouse became the subject of the broadside ballad 'A Night's Repose in Lambeth Workhouse'. As well as placing emphasis upon the swearing in the ward, the ballad also suggests that 'funny things' go on in the workhouse. See 'A Night's Repose in Lambeth Workhouse', printed by Ludwag, Westminster [no date], *Bodleian Library Broadside Ballads*, University of Oxford. Available at: <http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/ballads/> [date accessed 29 November 2013].

¹³⁰ [Greenwood], 'A Night in a Workhouse', 13 January 1866, p. 10.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² Koven compares *The Female Casual and her Lodging* to 'A Night in a Workhouse'. See Koven, *Slumming*, pp. 186-187.

the difficulty of selecting a suitable woman to undertake the experiment; she must, the text states, be someone ‘accustomed to rags and dirt’ in order to endure the vagrant ward, but should also be ‘familiar with cleanliness, honesty, and plenty’, so as to be able to comment accurately upon the conditions.¹³³ The woman he selected was a pauper widow who, in her narrative, initially goes by the name of Ellen Stanley. Disguised in filthy clothes, Stanley stayed overnight in the casual wards of the Newington, Lambeth (visited by Greenwood), Whitechapel and St George’s-in-the East workhouses. Asserting that the disorderly vagrants in the wards ‘drive away the decent poor’, Stallard suggests 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’.¹³⁴ The energies of the framing text are directed towards proving beyond doubt that the casual wards are filled with hardened vagrants who ‘wallow in filth, and look upon vermin as their natural companions’.¹³⁵ Stanley’s narrative, however, is at odds with this assumption; instead of revealing myriads of beggars and prostitutes who ‘wallow in filth’, the text in fact draws attention to women who are desperate to wash.

As in ‘A Night in a Workhouse’, the description of the wards in *The Female Casual* are similarly graphic in detailing the disgusting conditions of the wards and the casuals. In this text, however, dirt is devoid of any sense of allure.¹³⁶ Far from being immune to the dirt of the ward or unable to discern what dirt is, the female vagrants are all preoccupied with this topic: in the Whitechapel ward, ‘[t]he principal subject of conversation was the filthiness of

¹³³ J. H. Stallard, *The Female Casual and her Lodging: With a Complete Scheme for the Regulation of Workhouse Infirmaries* (London: Saunders, Otley, 1866), p. 3. Though the narrative of the wards is told from the first-person perspective of Ellen Stanley, the introduction draws attention to the unreliability of the narration. Stallard assures readers that ‘the picture may be regarded as practically correct’, but that ‘[i]t was absolutely necessary to soften down much of the language which was too gross for publication’. *Ibid.*, p. 4.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

¹³⁶ Koven draws attention to the contrast between Greenwood’s erotically-charged narrative and that of Ellen Stanley, pointing 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 romanticize it; her very survival and self-respect depended upon the daily struggle to keep her body and clothes clean’. See Koven, *Slumming*, p. 187.

the place'.¹³⁷ In each casual ward, the narrator encounters women who talk about washing and express their desire to be clean. In the Newington workhouse, for example, the narrator overhears a conversation between two hawkers; the younger woman 'said that she would like to wash her chemise, and the other said she could go to the public wash-house at three-halfpence an hour; but what, said the former, if you have not got the money?'¹³⁸ In the narrative of the Whitechapel casual ward, the porter describes the women occupying it as 'a dirty lot', but it is in fact the workhouse attendant who stops the women from cleaning themselves or even picking vermin from their clothes.¹³⁹ When the women leave the sleeping ward the next morning, the narrator recounts how

[o]utside the door there was a pail of water, but neither soap nor towels. Several attempted to wash [...but...] [t]he majority never washed at all, for they had no time, the big, fat woman continually driving them on by saying 'be quick,' 'be off,' 'get on,' etc. etc.¹⁴⁰

The dearth of washing facilities in the ward and the prohibitive cost of the public wash-house prevent the casuals from washing either themselves or their clothes. Rather than encouraging cleanliness, the workhouse authorities actively prevent the women from making any gestures (however superficial) towards washing.

The desperation of the female vagrants to be clean is articulated in the description of the St George's-in-the-East workhouse casual ward by 'Cranky Sal', a beggar who is 'more rogue than fool';¹⁴¹ Sally says, '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.'¹⁴² Sally's desperation to wash replaces her hunger for food as her most basic human necessity and, moved to sympathy, the narrator describes how she promised to give Sally a penny to

¹³⁷ Stallard, *The Female Casual*, p. 35.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 19, 28.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 56.

purchase a piece of soap. When one of the girls in this ward asks the attendant for ‘some water to wash’ with, she is told that ‘there was none, and no place for a bath’.¹⁴³ The fervent plea for ‘a drop of water in a pail just to swill our faces’ is refused on the basis that, ‘we have no orders’.¹⁴⁴ Once again, it is the workhouse system that forces the women to remain physically unclean. Rather than a damning treatise on the disorderly behaviour of the women, the text appears to be a narrative of the casuals’ attempts to clean themselves in a distinctly unsanitary space.

As well as being saturated with dirt, the pages of Stanley’s narrative swarm with vermin: the preoccupation with this is such that it appears to leech out of the boundaries of the text and afflict readers of the narrative with phantom itches. In each casual ward, the text describes the insects that infest the beds and rugs, cover the bread and speckle the walls. While Stanley suggests that the Lambeth vagrants ‘all seem accustomed to vermin, and they look for nothing better’, this implied acceptance of the vermin is belied by the narrative’s repeated focus upon how the women attempt to rid their bodies of it.¹⁴⁵ When the first two hawkers enter the Newington ward, both women strip off their clothes and begin to crush the bugs that infest them with their fingers. Though disgusted, Stanley admits that ‘I could not help watching [in] spite of all my fear’.¹⁴⁶ The next woman to enter the Newington ward is a ‘gypsy’-looking woman ‘under the influence of drink’, who also immediately begins to pick her dress and to scratch ferociously.¹⁴⁷ In the oakum-picking room the next day, the narrator asks this vagrant why she does this:

She replied, ‘All who come to these places have the itch, and are covered with vermin;’ and when I said that I was clean, she replied, ‘You will not be so long, for the beds in these places are all infected.’¹⁴⁸

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 57-58.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

According to this woman, becoming infested with vermin is an inevitable consequence of sleeping in a casual ward. By contrast to previous representations, in which the workhouse operates upon the ideology that cleanliness sanitises the morals of the poor, depictions of the casual wards suggest that a stay in this space leads to even ‘clean’ women becoming physically tainted.

Predictably, Stanley soon finds herself ‘covered with vermin, and in a state of constant misery’.¹⁴⁹ This scene is repeated in each casual ward visited and the repetitive descriptions of ‘beds [which] were alive with vermin, and the rugs with lice’ escalate to a point of frenzy.¹⁵⁰ In the Whitechapel vagrant’s ward, the women toss and turn in the heat and get up in order to ‘shake off their disgusting tormentors, which speckled their naked limbs with huge black spots’;¹⁵¹ finally, in the St Georges-in-the-East workhouse, the narrator is driven to a point of mania by the bugs that attack her body and describes how ‘I felt stung and irritated until I tore my flesh till it bled in every part of my body’.¹⁵² The effects of the lice are most disturbingly manifested in the description of a woman, the wife of a beggar, who is driven to distraction in the Lambeth workroom by incessant itching:

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.’¹⁵³

Unable to cope with the constant irritation, the woman, ‘roaring with madness’, strips off all her clothes and rips them to shreds in order to be issued clean ones.¹⁵⁴ When the assistant matron inspects the rags of clothing, however, 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

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 50.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 25.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

devilment'.¹⁵⁵ Although the text shows how the conditions of the ward push this woman into behaviour that is criminalised by the workhouse authorities, the representatives of power insist instead that the fault lies with the 'devilment' of the individual.

Dirt in this narrative is not simply a matter of physical discomfort. It is also implicitly linked to ideas about a policing of social-class boundaries. In the Newington casual ward, the narrator enquires whether there is any water to wash with:

'You may have as much as you like to drink,' they said, 'but none to wash.' 'Ah,' said the woman, 'I should so like a bath, for I am in a wretched state;' and the old hawker said 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.¹⁵⁶

All the women express a desire to wash, but none more so than the vagrant (the same depicted earlier as 'gypsy' looking) who describes herself as being in 'a wretched state'. This woman, who is wearing a skirt that is most likely prison issue and who declares that she has not washed for over three weeks, seems to fall overtly into the category of the undeserving poor referenced by Stallard: despite Stallard's assertion that women such as her 'wallow in filth', however, Stanley's narrative references only this vagrant's desire to be clean again. The old hawker's comment that the oakum-picking task leaves her unable to sell her lace draws attention to the hypocrisy of a system that hinders the poor from being self-sufficient: the dirt of the casual ward prevents this hawker from making a living and entraps her in a cycle of vagrancy.¹⁵⁷ The younger hawker then offers the narrator some advice upon matters of cleanliness:

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 12, 15.

¹⁵⁷ Mary Higgs also conducted an undercover investigation into casual wards. See Mary Higgs, *Glimpses into the Abyss* (London: P. S. King, 1906). Koven notes that Higgs' 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 [...], 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.

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.’¹⁵⁸

Although the apparent ideology of the workhouse proper seems to be to inculcate in the poor the ideals of middle-class cleanliness, both the casual ward and the state authorities actively prevent the transient poor from attaining any degree of cleanliness whatsoever. The woman’s remark that ‘the police are down upon you’ suggests that the state polices the class-inscribed boundaries of cleanliness that separate vagrants from the industrious poor and ensnare them in a rigid social hierarchy.

The casual ward is imagined by the narrator to pose a threat, not just to the livelihoods of the women, but to life itself. These spaces are constructed in the text as sites of dangerous physical contamination. When she is given a dirty shirt to wear on entering the Whitechapel ward, she protests ‘[b]ut this is not clean, and if I put it on and get disease what would become of me?’¹⁵⁹ The reply from the porter that he ‘can’t answer for it, they are a dirty lot’, suggests that the porter sees the bodies of the poor, rather than the ward, as the source of contagion.¹⁶⁰ The threat of disease is realised as the narrator begins to feel unwell: ‘About twelve o’clock the closeness and heat of the room became intolerable, and every one began to feel ill and to suffer from diarrhoea.’¹⁶¹ The text suggests that the casual ward is a site of noxious contamination that poisons the surrounding neighbourhood; as the narrator states, ‘[n]o wonder there is cholera at the East of London, for it is generated every night in the Whitechapel casual ward’.¹⁶² This idea of disease seeping out of the casual ward suggests the

¹⁵⁸ Stallard, *The Female Casual*, p. 15.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 37.

transgressive ability of filth to collapse the boundary between the ward and the city around it.¹⁶³

Similarly, in the St George's-in-the-East workhouse, there is an overwhelming sense of claustrophobia in the description of the pitch black ward and the 'stifling closeness of the air'.¹⁶⁴ Once again, fear of disease permeates the narrative and the narrator is 'haunted' by the thought of cholera.¹⁶⁵ She is seized with illness and, on finding the water closet, is confronted by a horrifying sight:

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.¹⁶⁶

This moment represents a culmination of the text's repeated attention to dirt. The abject description of human waste actively oozing up out of the floor suggests a mingling of the organic body and the inorganic building, and points to the ward as the producer of a threatening filth.¹⁶⁷ Recalling this 'stinking dungeon', Stanley reveals that she 'longed that some one interested in the treatment of the poor could look in!'¹⁶⁸ In particular, Stanley references the 'kind interest' of Miss Burdett Coutts (a workhouse reformer): 'I thought if she could see the way in which her sisters suffer she would stir to help them. Often and often I hoped you would look in, and I prayed that you would hear the groans of the women'.¹⁶⁹ The hope that 'you would look in' is a direct appeal to Burdett Coutts, but also to all other readers

¹⁶³ Erin O'Connor suggests that '[c]holera [...] became the operative term in an entire metaphoric of bodily contamination, a figure for the fluidity of boundaries in metropolitan space'. Erin O'Connor quoted in Gilbert, 'Medical Mapping', p. 83.

¹⁶⁴ Stallard, *The Female Casual*, p. 45.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

¹⁶⁷ Bashford points out that, in sanitarian discourse, 'bodies and buildings were mutually affective' and analyses the sanitary reformer John Simon's idea that buildings actively fouled themselves. See Bashford, *Purity and Pollution*, pp. xi, 16-17.

¹⁶⁸ Stallard, *The Female Casual*, p. 49.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

of the text to turn their attention to the casual wards and the plight faced by the poor women forced to populate them.

Mrs Brewer's series of investigative articles, 'Workhouse Life in Town and Country' (1889-1899), was published in *Sunday at Home* nearly thirty years after the *Lancet* reports and 'A Night in a Workhouse' scandalised the nation. These articles report on workhouse conditions and, unlike many of the texts previously discussed, primarily express approbation of the institutions visited. According to Brewer, the care provided in workhouses and the casual wards had improved dramatically by the end of the century.¹⁷⁰ In the description of the St Leonard's workhouse, for example, all of the major failings condemned in the *Lancet* have been remedied: the old infirmary has been replaced by a new one and trained nurses have replaced unpaid pauper assistants. Whereas the *Lancet* investigators uncovered hidden dirt at the flick of every bed sheet, Brewer's investigations detect nothing but cleanliness; the text notes that the sheets and pillow cases are changed regularly, and that the towels in the lavatory are changed daily.

The importance placed upon sanitary guidelines in these narratives is demonstrated by the attention paid in all the texts to the washing and cleaning facilities; in the Marylebone workhouse, the text comments that, 'there are bath-rooms heated with stoves, lavatories, all sweet, clean, and fresh, and amply supplied with water'.¹⁷¹ Indeed, a thorough inspection of the Marylebone workhouse reveals that '[t]here was not a dirty corner in the place'.¹⁷² The cleanliness of the workhouse extends even to the casual wards:

¹⁷⁰ These texts refer back to the *Lancet* articles and seek to demonstrate the significance of the Sanitary Commission in terms of inaugurating reform. As the second article points out, '[t]he revelations of the Lancet Commission, in 1865, brought about a revolution in the whole administration of the Poor Law'. Mrs Brewer, 'Workhouse Life in Town and Country. [...] II.', *Sunday at Home*, 10 August 1889, pp. 507-509 (p. 508).

¹⁷¹ Mrs Brewer, 'Workhouse Life in Town and Country. III. A Visit to Marylebone.', *Sunday at Home*, 17 August 1889, pp. 524-526 (525).

¹⁷² Mrs Brewer, 'Workhouse Life in Town and Country. IV.', *Sunday at Home*, 24 August 1889, pp. 541-543 (p. 543).

The cells, for one person only, are clean and neat, provided with an electric bell, iron bedstead and bedding. [...] For supper each casual receives a pint of gruel and six ounces of bread, after which a compulsory bath and then to bed. The water is changed for each person, the days of pea-soup baths for the poor creatures, such as the ‘Amateur Casual’ had at Lambeth, are things of the past.¹⁷³

By contrast to the crowding together of bodies in the casual wards, described in ‘A Night in a Workhouse’ and ‘Destitution in the Metropolis’, the casuals in this ward are separated into individual cells that physically enforce separation. Brewer’s report on the Lambeth workhouse itself similarly emphasises the improvements made to these wards. As the text points out,

[t]o have visited Lambeth Workhouse some twenty-five years ago would have been an insane act on the part of any one not obliged to do so. It was too filthy and disorganised for decent people to put their heads into. This became known through the length and breadth of the land by the revelations of ‘A Night in a London Workhouse’.¹⁷⁴

Now, towards the end of the century, the casual hall in Lambeth is reported to be ‘large, high, bare, and clean’;¹⁷⁵ the text implies that the memory of ‘A Night in a Workhouse’ belongs to an unsavoury past of which no traces remain in the sanitised modern day.

Despite the dramatic change in workhouse conditions, however, ideas of dirt and cleanliness are no less ideological than at the start of the century. As Brewer points out, ‘[w]hatever encourages habits of industry, prudence, forethought, virtue, and cleanliness is beneficial, and whatever removes or diminishes the incitement to any of these qualities is detrimental to the State and pernicious to the individual’.¹⁷⁶ Here, cleanliness is equated with qualities such as ‘virtue’ and is rendered overtly political by the mention of the ‘State’; by contrast, dirtiness is constructed as an anarchic condition that poses a threat to the status-quo

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 542.

¹⁷⁴ ‘Workhouse Life in Town and Country [...] Lambeth’, *Sunday at Home*, 15 March 1890, pp. 316-319 (p. 316).

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 318.

¹⁷⁶ Mrs Brewer, ‘Workhouse Life in Town and Country. By Mrs. Brewer, Author of “Hospital Sketches at Home and Abroad.”’, *Sunday at Home*, 13 July 1889, pp. 437- 439 (p. 437).

of the nation. Although workhouse reform led to the vast improvement of living conditions for paupers, it seems that advances in the sanitary state of the house were always implicitly bound up with the tightening of mechanisms of control over the wayward bodies of the poor.

A Moral Malaria

In nineteenth-century discourse, cleanliness and dirt are overwhelmingly associated with ideas of morality and immorality. As well as the physical threat of disease, many workhouse narratives discuss the moral filth that was believed to emanate from the workhouse space. The potential for immoral habits to spread between individuals living in close quarters is widely documented in sanitarian discourses about the slums and cheap lodging houses. The perceived threat of moral contamination was thus intensified in the overcrowded dayrooms and sleeping wards of the workhouses which, as Paula Bartley points out, came to be thought of as ‘promiscuous environments’.¹⁷⁷ Though the intention of the New Poor Law had been to assign classes of inmates to separate buildings, in reality, most unions had only a general-mixed workhouse, in which all the paupers were housed together. Within this general-mixed workhouse, stringent separation was meant to be enforced between the classes of paupers. In practice, however, classification could never be fully enforced and the boundaries between the classes were often breached.

The early reports of the Poor Law Commissioners draw attention to the breakdown of the classification system and the resultant moral contamination. A letter from the master of the Boston union workhouse, included in the *Sixth Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners* (1840), draws attention to the harmful practice of allowing children to have any association with adults. Though the workhouse officials ‘endeavour to inculcate morality,

¹⁷⁷ Paula Bartley, *Prostitution: Prevention and Reform in England, 1860-1914* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 105.

to accustom them to habits of cleanliness, industry, and order', the workhouse inevitably contains 'influences which will retard and impede the moral training of children'.¹⁷⁸ The corruptive 'influences' that the master refers to are the presence and interference of adults with the children. The master asserts that, no matter how well run the workhouse may be, the classification of inmates can never be absolute and some communal spaces of the workhouse cause the careful structures of segregation to collapse; for example, the dining-hall is a 'leveller of distinctions' that is inhabited by all classes of inmates.¹⁷⁹ In this space, the children can observe the disruptive behaviour of the adults and learn to mimic them. The master suggests that the mere presence of the able-bodied paupers in the same room as the children threatens to 'corrupt their minds' and incites them to disobedience and insolence.¹⁸⁰

The group of inmates perceived to be most vulnerable were the girls and young women. In the *Fourth Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners* (1838), the text draws attention to the corruptive effects of any association between adult paupers and children, but specifies that this association is 'particularly detrimental among the females', as it is the young girls who are most susceptible to corruptive influences.¹⁸¹ Like the dining room in the Boston union workhouse, the domestic spaces of the workhouse are unwholesome sites in which girls are schooled in the habits of vice by older women; the text points out that 'the girls are set to work in the kitchen, the sleeping wards and the washhouse, with young women of depraved character and dissolute manners, and they return at intervals to the school reluctant and corrupted'.¹⁸² As in the later *Lancet* report on the Wolverhampton workhouse, specific rooms in the workhouse (particularly those which are predominantly female spaces), are imagined as sites conducive to the transmittance of moral disease. As Alison Bashford

¹⁷⁸ *Sixth Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners* (London: Printed by W. Clowes and Sons, 1840), p. 176.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁸¹ *Fourth Annual Report of the Poor Law Commissioners For England and Wales* (London: Printed by W. Clowes and Sons, 1838), p. 269.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*

notes, in sanitarian discourse, it was believed that ‘dirt could emanate from an unhygienic body or an immoral body and “foul” the atmosphere of a room or building’.¹⁸³ The ‘fouling’ of the workhouse air by paupers stained with moral dirt, and the subsequent pollution of other bodies, is explicit in the *Fourth Annual Report*, which suggests that ‘the contagion of vice’ offsets any beneficial lessons learnt by the children; the young have no chance of remaining undefiled when ‘all around them is the very atmosphere of pauperism’.¹⁸⁴ Speaking of these adult paupers in the Boston union workhouse, the master asserts that ‘[t]heir habits and opinions are not only inveterate and unconquerable, but contagious, which makes the atmosphere of a workhouse very dangerous for children to breathe in’.¹⁸⁵ Similarly to the reports of hospital infirmaries, in which patients are physically poisoned by breathing in foul air, the pauper children are constructed in this text as imbibing vice by sharing the same air as a degenerate adult. The reports of the Poor Law Commissioners create a vocabulary of moral miasma, equating the influence of the adult paupers to a noxious effluvia that susceptible inmates can ingest.

As well as being susceptible to the influences of unsavoury characters, it is the young women who are also the most likely to defile others. As the most controversial class of inmates, the able-bodied women were frequently the subject of debate and discussion. In the *Report of the Poor Law Commissioners to the Most Noble the Marquis of Normanby* (1840), for example, a report from Dr Kay to the Commissioners outlines the difficulties faced by the guardians of the St George’s-in-the-East workhouse in managing the ‘gross misconduct of the dissolute young women’.¹⁸⁶ Though ‘this class of women is universally found to be a source of demoralisation and disorder [...] in all workhouses’, the writer asserts that ‘the evil

¹⁸³ Bashford, *Purity and Pollution*, p. 17.

¹⁸⁴ *Fourth Annual Report*, p. 269.

¹⁸⁵ *Sixth Annual Report*, p. 178.

¹⁸⁶ *Report of the Poor Law Commissioners to the Most Noble the Marquis of Normanby [...] on the Continuance of the Poor Law Commission and on Some Further Amendments of the Laws Relating to the Relief of the Poor* (London: Printed by W. Clowes and Sons, 1840), p. 287.

presents itself in an aggravated form in the workhouse of the parish of St. George in the East'.¹⁸⁷ Included in the *Report* is a letter from the clerk to the guardians and statements about the conduct of individual women, which seek to demonstrate that they are 'abominable in their conversation, and violent and riotous in their behaviour'.¹⁸⁸ The guardians complain that, as well as being unmanageable, these women also 'ruin the morals of the younger girls' and encourage them to emulate similar behaviour.¹⁸⁹

Sexual promiscuity was a particular cause for concern and workhouse discourse often conflates unmarried mothers and prostitutes, testifying to the widely held belief that an illegitimate pregnancy would inevitably lead to prostitution.¹⁹⁰ Dr Kay's correspondence to the Commissioners conveys the guardians' appeal that an asylum should be established for 'abandoned women', in which the 'refuse of the prostitution of London' may be set to work under 'wholesome restraint and discipline'.¹⁹¹ The vocabulary of the text equates these women to the dirtiest form of rubbish: they are the very 'refuse' of this class of prostitutes.¹⁹² The corruptive risk posed by these women is similarly recognised by the guardians of the Bourn union workhouse. In a letter to Edwin Chadwick, the guardians seek approval for their proposal that 'the able-bodied *married* women and *widows* be removed into the *aged* women's ward, to avoid the contamination and degradation of associating with women having bastard children'.¹⁹³ The removal of these apparently virtuous women from the able-

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 288. Amongst the deviant behaviours listed are vices such as drunkenness, laziness and 'disgusting vulgarity'. One of the harshest reports is about a fifteen-year-old girl who is 'altogether wicked', 'addicted to lying' and 'dirty in her person'. *Ibid.*, pp. 289, 290.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 288.

¹⁹⁰ Bartley considers the "'slippery slope theory" whereby single motherhood led inevitably to prostitution'. See Bartley, *Prostitution*, p. 104.

¹⁹¹ *Report of the Poor Law Commissioners to the Most Noble the Marquis of Normanby*, pp. 287-288.

¹⁹² The *Sixth Annual Report* includes minutes on the subject of 'ignominious dress for unchaste women in workhouses'. The Commissioners 'are informed that in several Union workhouses single women, mothers of children or pregnant, are compelled to wear a dress of a peculiar colour as a mark of disgrace'. *Sixth Annual Report*, p. 98. The wards occupied by these women were known colloquially as 'Canary Wards'. See Sidney Webb and Beatrice Webb, *English Poor Law Policy* (London: Frank Cass and Co., 1963), p. 76.

¹⁹³ *Report of the Poor Law Commissioners to the Most Noble the Marquis of Normanby*, p. 293. The fear of contamination is similarly given voice by the paupers who lived in these general-mixed workhouses. The letter written by the former inmate of the Chorlton union workhouse points out that 'the commonest prostitutes (if free

bodied ward is intended to spare them from ‘the corrupting influences and disgusting conversation and habits’ of inmates of ‘abandoned character’ who make ‘a convenient use of the Workhouse as a lying-in hospital’.¹⁹⁴ The text’s unsympathetic stance suggests that these women exploit the resources of the Poor Law system and defile the whole establishment at the same time.

Bound up with the problem of prostitution was the more physical risk of venereal disease. As Mary Spongberg points out, ‘[m]edical discourse had effectively pathologized the prostitute during the nineteenth century, emphasizing the idea that prostitutes created venereal disease within themselves’.¹⁹⁵ Venereal disease was thus intrinsically associated with the bodies of these sexually-immoral women, who were not only the carriers of afflictions such as syphilis, but were also blamed as the causative agents. The *Report of the Poor Law Commissioners to the Most Noble the Marquis of Normanby* includes correspondence between the guardians of the Richmond union workhouse in Surrey and the Poor Law Commissioners; the guardians’ letter asks whether it is lawful to prevent paupers from discharging themselves from the workhouse whilst suffering from ‘any dangerous or infectious disease’ and refers specifically to the case of a pauper woman to whom the master refused to allow short-term leave.¹⁹⁶ The woman was ‘labouring under severe venereal

from disease) are placed along with respectable married women’. Though they are not afflicted with physical disease, the writer suggests that these women and their ‘disgusting’ conversations represent a non-physical threat to the other inmates, and constructs the workhouse space as ‘a school for becoming initiated into all that is bad’. See ‘The Chorlton Union Workhouse’, p. 7. The belief in the dangers of moral contamination, shared by this working-class woman and the male Poor Law authorities, is shown to transcend class and gender boundaries.

¹⁹⁴ *Report of the Poor Law Commissioners to the Most Noble the Marquis of Normanby*, p. 293. A letter published many years later in the *English Woman’s Review* under the heading ‘Some Pressing Evils of the New Poor Law’ (1882), launches a similar attack upon these ‘abandoned’ women. The writer, a female workhouse guardian, alleges the moral and economic cost of allowing women to use the workhouse as ‘a lodging-house and a lying-in hospital’, to stay for as long as they want, and then leave to ‘indulge in sin and crime’. Agatha Stacey, ‘Correspondence; Some Pressing Evils of the Poor Law Administration’, *English Woman’s Review*, 15 June 1885, pp. 252-256 (pp. 252, 253).

¹⁹⁵ Mary Spongberg, *Feminizing Venereal Disease: The Body of the Prostitute in Nineteenth-Century Medical Discourse* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1997), p. 166.

¹⁹⁶ *Report of the Poor Law Commissioners to the Most Noble the Marquis of Normanby*, p. 294. A. Fessler analyses venereal disease in the reports of the Commissioners and refers to this particular case. See A. Fessler

disease' and, as the master considered that her discharge was 'neither safe for herself nor others', he decided not to give her permission to leave the house.¹⁹⁷ The master's refusal to give leave to this pauper is an act of social policing; by attempting to contain the diseased body of the woman in the workhouse, the master regulates female sexual behaviour and protects the public from the effects of her unsanitary body.¹⁹⁸ In order to visit her lover, however, it is reported that the woman instead gave formal notice to leave the house permanently and then readmitted herself three days later. The statement that this abuse of the system potentially spreads 'disease [...] amongst the community', constructs the body of the woman as a corrupted and corruptive vector of degeneracy.¹⁹⁹

The reply from the Commissioners confirms that temporary absences from the house are mostly used 'for a bad purpose by persons who, finding the temperance, cleanliness and order of the Workhouse irksome to them, wish to enjoy a short interval of riot and debauch'.²⁰⁰ Once again, young women are singled out as the most blameworthy class who, when absent from the workhouse, spend their time employed in 'disorder, drunkenness, prostitution, and other mal practices'.²⁰¹ Echoing the language of 'Two Hours at a Union House', the response implies that the 'irksome' cleanliness of the workhouse frustrates the women's inclination for 'dirty behaviour'. Though the Commissioners' reply recognises that this particular woman's promiscuous behaviour might spread venereal disease, it concludes that workhouse officers are not able to refuse to allow any sane pauper the right to leave.

'Venereal Disease and Prostitution in the Reports of the Poor Law Commissioners, 1834-1850', *British Journal of Venereal Disease*, 27:3 (1951), 154-157 (p. 156).

¹⁹⁷ *Report of the Poor Law Commissioners to the Most Noble the Marquis of Normanby*, p. 294.

¹⁹⁸ The master's prevention of the woman from leaving the workhouse prefigures the intentions of the Contagious Diseases Acts in the 1860s. Judith R. Walkowitz explains that '[u]nder the acts, a woman could be identified as a "common prostitute" by a special plainclothes policeman and then subjected to a fortnightly internal examination. If found suffering from gonorrhoea or syphilis, she would be interned in a certified lock hospital'. See Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), pp. 1-2.

¹⁹⁹ *Report of the Poor Law Commissioners to the Most Noble the Marquis of Normanby*, p. 294. Referring to this example, and other similar ones in the reports, Fessler points out that venereal disease was 'regarded almost exclusively as a moral one, and a venereal infection was thought to be proof of the utmost depravity, especially in the female'. See Fessler, 'Venereal Disease', p. 156.

²⁰⁰ *Report of the Poor Law Commissioners to the Most Noble the Marquis of Normanby*, p. 294.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*

An Account of the Situation and Treatment of the Women with Illegitimate Children in the New Forest Union Workhouse [...] (1838), written by a workhouse chaplain, is a particularly vitriolic diatribe against unmarried mothers; the chaplain records in his diary that their wards are ‘the most painful to inspect and the most difficult to manage’.²⁰² The pamphlet is intended to function as a didactic warning to ‘the young and inexperienced among the female sex’ so that they might ‘learn a timely lesson of prudence and virtue’.²⁰³ While the reports of the Poor Law Commissioners express the deep-seated belief that immoral habits will be inculcated in girls who observe the unruly behaviour of other women, the chaplain’s text suggests that the description of these women in print will have the opposite effect on young women of the more respectable classes, teaching them sexual continence by reading about workhouse women.

The chaplain draws attention to the lack of classification between the pauper women as a cause for concern and asserts that a ‘stricter system of treatment’ needs to be adopted.²⁰⁴ For this purpose, the text advocates for the separation of unmarried mothers from all other women in the house, a system that is akin to quarantining the sufferers of infectious disease. The chaplain proposes that these women ‘should not be employed in cleaning the House (except their own apartments,) nor in the Kitchen, nor should other women be admitted into the Laundry’, so as to prevent them from having ‘any intercourse with the rest of the Inmates’.²⁰⁵ The chaplain’s suggestions are founded upon the belief that these promiscuous women pose a threat to the morals of the other inmates and that their sexual incontinence

²⁰² Herbert Smith, *An Account of the Situation and Treatment of the Women with Illegitimate Children in the New Forest Union Workhouse; with some Suitable Remarks on the Sin of Fornication and its Consequences* (London: printed by W. Tyler, 1838), p. 4.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 3. The text seems an odd choice of reading matter for young women.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6. A letter headed ‘Some Pressing Evils of the New Poor Law’ is included in the text. In this letter the writer similarly asserts that ‘women should have separate sleeping compartments, and separate compartments in the laundry and at the washtubs’. *Ibid.*, p. 256.

could be transmitted to others as they go about their routines of cleaning the house.²⁰⁶ While the paupers in Martineau's 'The Hamlets' are disciplined by cleanliness into 'good' behaviour, here it is feared that the act of cleaning in fact disseminates moral dirt around the house. As proof of the contagious sexual immorality of the female inmates, the chaplain of the New Forest workhouse reports the instance of a pauper inmate who became pregnant by the porter. The result of this illicit union was that the porter and his child also ended up becoming workhouse paupers. In addition to being contagious, sexual immorality is shown to directly result in the spread of pauperism.

The intense debates surrounding women with illegitimate children in the decade after the Poor Law Amendment Act were due, in part, to the Act's Bastardy clauses. Before the passing of the Act, an unmarried mother could publically swear to the father of her illegitimate child, who would then be liable for his or her maintenance. In an attempt to decrease the numbers of illegitimate births and to prevent dishonest women from swearing a child to the richest man in the parish, the 1834 clause placed the responsibility for the care of the child solely upon the mother.²⁰⁷ Fanny Trollope's *Jessie Phillips* engages with contemporary debates about the workhouse system and, specifically, launches a scathing attack upon the principles of the Bastardy Clause. The iniquitous effects of the new act upon women is represented in the novel when the new legal approach motivates the upper-class philanderer Frederick Dalton to seduce Jessie; he congratulates himself with the thought that '[i]t is just one of my little bits of good luck that this blessed law should be passed'.²⁰⁸ With

²⁰⁶ Similarly, in 'The Workhouse Girl' (1869), published in *Good Words*, the act of cleaning the house is again shown to collapse the boundaries put in place between classes of inmates. Discussing the corruptions of the refractory ward, the text points out that 'some of the women who have been inmates of this ward, are at times allowed to do the work of the house, and, of course, to come into contact with the other inmates, old and young, of both sexes'. S. E. De Morgan, 'The Workhouse Girl', *Good Words*, 1 April 1869, pp. 284-288 (p. 285).

²⁰⁷ For more information on the history of the Bastardy Clause, see U. R. Q. Henriques, 'Bastardy and the New Poor Law', *Past and Present*, 37 (1967), 103-129.

²⁰⁸ Trollope, *Jessie Phillips*, p. 108. Helen Heineman suggests that this moment and other similar ones in the novel are 'somewhat improbable', but points out that the novel must have been a factor in the repeal of the Bastardy Clause in 1844. See Helen Heineman, 'Frances Trollope's *Jessie Phillips*: Sexual Politics and the New Poor Law', *International Journal of Women's Studies*, 1 (1978), 96-106 (pp. 99, 102).

no legal right to maintenance, the naïve and unmarried Jessie takes refuge in the workhouse when she falls pregnant. Instead of condemning Jessie, however, the novel cultivates sympathy for the plight of this unmarried expectant mother, the victim of a patriarchal system that favours the womanising seducer. The potentially tragic results of the new law are voiced by Caroline, a dissolute inmate of the workhouse, who explains that, by making ‘the girl’s share too bad to bear’, it leads to her committing infanticide or suicide.²⁰⁹ Though Caroline is condemned in the text as a promiscuous prostitute, the narrator suggests that, on this particular point, her comment ‘had enough of truth and practical wisdom to redeem it from oblivion’.²¹⁰ The text’s agenda is to reveal the hypocrisy and cruelty of the Bastardy Clause and to provoke in readers sympathy for the women who are the hapless victims of this legislation.

Rather than encompassing all workhouse women in this liberal stance, however, the text distinguishes a moral boundary between Jessie’s plight and the sexual immorality of the seaport prostitutes who populate the workhouse. Of all the hardships that Jessie endures in the workhouse, the lack of segregation in the women’s ward is the hardest to bear; although she enters the workhouse with a masochistic desire to punish herself for her sexual transgression, it had never ‘occurred to her that the fellowship to which she was so freely confining herself was not only that of paupers, but of prostitutes’.²¹¹ The inmates of the women’s ward are described as being ‘recklessly mingled’ and Jessie is sickened to find herself ‘shut up with, and constantly surrounded by, some of the vilest and most thoroughly abandoned women that the lowest degradation of vice could produce’.²¹² Irritated by Jessie’s

²⁰⁹ Trollope, *Jessie Phillips*, p. 326. Though the Bastardy Clause was repealed, later texts suggest that suicide was not an uncommon fate for workhouse girls with illegitimate babies. The short story ‘Mary Ann’, published in *Butterfly* towards the ends of the century, narrates the tragic story of a workhouse girl who suffers such an ending. In the text, Mary Ann, a respectable former servant, discharges herself from the workhouse with her new-born infant and, unable to earn a living or to bear the shame, drowns herself and her child. See Alice M. Boyle, ‘Mary Ann’, *Butterfly*, February 1894, pp. 202-213.

²¹⁰ Trollope, *Jessie Phillips*, p. 326.

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 322.

²¹² *Ibid.*

appearance of shame, these seaport prostitutes deliberately torment her, teasing her about her pregnancy and speculating about the identity of the father. By consequence of being confined with these women, Jessie is forced ‘to listen to the light jestings of hardened sin, instead of the solemn yet healing meditations of her own conscience’.²¹³ The text implies that the loose gossip of the ward is unhealthy, as it prevents Jessie from contemplating ‘healing’ thoughts. As well as affecting Jessie, the prostitutes’ talk also has a harmful effect on other inmates of the ward: ‘the old were shocked and disgusted, while the young, though appalled, were contaminated’.²¹⁴ The novel thus employs the language of health and disease in the textual representation of the ward and the ‘contaminated’ women who afflict the other inmates with their degenerate values.

The sense of degradation suffered by Jessie and the other respectable women of the house is vividly illustrated by Frances Power Cobbe’s narrative ‘Workhouse Sketches’ (1861), published in *Macmillan’s Magazine*. According to this narrative, when a woman enters the workhouse, her ‘last rags and shreds of modesty [...] are ruthlessly torn away, [...] by the hideous gossip over the degrading labour of oakum-picking, or the idle lounging about in the “women’s ward”’.²¹⁵ As in many texts, the female ward is represented as a lewd and corruptive space that threatens women with ‘moral ruin’ as surely as illicit sex;²¹⁶ the ‘ruthless’ tearing of the female pauper’s ‘rags’ of modesty suggests a physical, and violent, violation of her body. Attempting to represent the horrors of the women’s ward to readers, in which ‘it is contamination for a girl once to set her foot’, ‘Workhouse Sketches’ describes how a chaplain came across ‘a scene which has haunted us ever since’: in the ward, the women were

[l]ocked up together through the whole blessed summer time, wrangling, cursing, talking of all unholy things, till, mad with sin and despair, they danced, and shouted

²¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 323.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 326.

²¹⁵ Francis Power Cobbe, ‘Workhouse Sketches’, *Macmillan’s Magazine*, April 1861, pp. 448-461 (p. 449).

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*

their hideous songs in such utter shamelessness and fury that none dared to enter their den of agony.²¹⁷

The ward is melodramatically depicted in the text as an animal-like ‘den’ that is site of maniacal disease; the ‘sin and despair’ of the occupants are pathologised as symptoms resulting from a stay in this workhouse ward.

By contrast to the focus upon the depravity of these workhouse women, other narratives focus instead upon the social circumstances that push women into a life spent in pauperism and prostitution, and suggest that a more sympathetic reading of these women is required. In the preface of Sheppard’s *Sunshine in the Workhouse*, for instance, it is noted that a clerical friend once expressed to her the view that ‘the kind sympathy of a Christian woman’s heart is just the soft soap which we require to make our mechanisms work’.²¹⁸ This ‘soft soap’ suggests the feminine sympathy proffered by lady visitors to the inmates, but also suggests ideas of moral cleanliness; in this text, the visitor has a purifying influence upon the inmates, restoring them to a state of moral health.

Sheppard displays particular concern for the unmarried mothers and prostitutes in the workhouse ‘foul ward’, which housed paupers suffering from venereal disease.²¹⁹ A letter sent by Sheppard to the editor of *The Times* and cited in *Sunshine in the Workhouse* seeks to draw attention to the hopeless predicament of these women.²²⁰ Once they have recovered from the disease that brought them into the workhouse, they are ‘driven from the “foul ward,” (properly so called,) into the “wide, wide, world,” to inevitable iniquity’.²²¹ The letter generates sympathy for these women, the victims of social circumstance, and places the blame for their plight upon an uncaring society. In the text, Sheppard emphasises that these

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 449, 450.

²¹⁸ Sheppard, *Sunshine in the Workhouse*, p. v.

²¹⁹ For more information on the history of foul wards, see Siena, *Venereal Disease*.

²²⁰ Sheppard, *Sunshine in the Workhouse*, pp. 36-37.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

women often crave the opportunity to reform but cannot find employment once they have been discharged from the workhouse:

When I found them returning again and again to that loathsome ward, and sorrowfully reproached them, the answer was, ‘What can we do? No one would give work to such as *we*; we must either have died on a dunghill or gone back to sin.’ And so it was.²²²

Tainted by the workhouse foul ward, the women are locked into a cycle of prostitution and pauperism from which they have no hope of ever escaping.²²³ By contrast to the debates about the punitive measures needed to control these women in other texts, Sheppard’s text focuses instead upon the potential for these girls to reform.

From the 1860s onwards, there emerged a proliferation of investigative articles that sought to identify the reasons why workhouse girls so often ended up walking the streets. One such article, ‘The Workhouse Girl’ (1869) in *Good Words*, points out that a girl’s life ‘is beset with stumbling-blocks from the moment when she first breathes the polluted air of her native court or the workhouse ward’.²²⁴ While the corruptive influence of other women is again identified as encouraging girls to mimic idle and dissolute behaviour, the workhouse system itself is explicitly said to be schooling girls for a life on the streets. A quotation from Frances Power Cobbe, included in ‘The Workhouse Girl’, states that ‘one of the largest channels through which young lives are drifted down into the dead sea which underlies all our vaunted civilisation is the workhouse’.²²⁵ Power Cobbe’s words suggest that the workhouse provides a direct link to the seedy underbelly of Victorian society. The ease with which girls pass from the workhouse to the streets is articulated in an anecdote in Power Cobbe’s ‘Workhouse Sketches’ (1861), published in *Macmillan’s Magazine*: the text reports that, after being reprimanded for a misdemeanour, a pauper girl threatened to leave the house

²²² *Ibid.*, p. 37.

²²³ The various letters cited in *Sunshine in the Workhouse* emphasise the need to provide Magdalen penitentiaries to save fallen women from returning to the streets. For more information on reform institutions, see Bartley, *Prostitution*.

²²⁴ Morgan, ‘The Workhouse Girl’, p. 286.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 285.

rather than submit to punishment. Upon being asked by the master how she would survive outside the house, she is said to have ‘indicated bluntly the sinful “livelihood,” whose secret she said she had learned since she came to the workhouse’.²²⁶ Once again, the workhouse is revealed as corrupting girls and schooling them in the ‘secrets’ of prostitution. The idea of the workhouse as a training ground for the streets is made explicit by the words of a Poor Law inspector included in ‘The Girl from the Workhouse’ (1862) in *All the Year Round*; having inspected a girls’ disorderly ward, the inspector commented that it ‘afforded a lamentable confirmation of the fact that the guardians were bringing up their girls in a manner that would only tend to increase pauperism, and he might say prostitution, in the town’.²²⁷ Far from aimlessly drifting into a life on the streets, the inspector’s comment suggests that the workhouse system actively grooms girls for a life of prostitution.

In 1894, the article ‘Moral Sanitation’, published in the *Woman’s Signal*, expressed the hope that new technology for ensuring good hygiene would have a direct impact upon the morals of the corrupt poor. The text observes, ‘[n]otably it is an age of sanitation and drainage. All the improved appliances enforcing cleanliness in our model buildings for the working classes prove it’.²²⁸ In workhouses, modern appliances, such as industrial washing machines, were introduced in the mid-nineteenth century and facilitated the house-keeping tasks of the institution. The article ‘Steam-Washing Machinery at St. Pancras Workhouse’ (1857) in the *Illustrated London News*, reports on the newly-installed washing machines at this institution and draws attention to the time saved in doing the weekly laundry.²²⁹ As well as increasing the efficiency of workhouse laundries, the new technology drastically reduced

²²⁶ Power Cobbe, ‘Workhouse Sketches’, p. 449. *Oliver Twist* is also exposed to the secrets of a deviant lifestyle: ‘He had often heard the old men in the workhouse [...] say that no lad of spirit need want in London; and that there were ways of making a living in that vast city, which those who had been bred up in country parts had no idea of’. Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, ed. Kathleen Tillotson (1838; Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008) p. 54.

²²⁷ ‘The Girl from the Workhouse’, *All the Year Round*, 18 October 1862, pp. 132-136 (p. 135).

²²⁸ ‘Moral Sanitation’, *Woman’s Signal*, 1 November 1894, p. 292.

²²⁹ ‘Steam-Washing Machinery at St. Pancras Workhouse’, *Illustrated London News*, 3 October 1857, p. 341. The accompanying illustration of the machinery in action dominates a third of the page.

the need for human labour: in a review of Bradford's laundry machines in the *British Architect*, the text points out that the industrial appliances can wash up to 200 items at a time and 'will reverse the motion of the washing compartment every one, two, or three minutes [...] without personal attention'.²³⁰ Bradford's advertisements (fig. 3) for steam laundries draw attention to their ability to operate almost independently; while the image of the 'Domestic and Hand Power Laundries' depicts women within the space, they are notably absent in the picture of the steam-powered laundries. The article 'Moral Sanitation' is optimistic about the effects of these machines:

now that a moral sanitation has been inaugurated, that the dustbins of immorality and lust are to be emptied out and cleaned under the eye of these public officers of health, and then held in check by public opinion, what may we not hope for the future of our young men and maidens, who have hitherto been poisoned by the malaria of unconcealed passions.²³¹

The vocabulary of these few lines reveals an intense preoccupation with the interconnected concerns of sanitary reform, contagious disease and moral hygiene. Along with the removal of physical dirt, these machines are invested with the power to inaugurate a simultaneous 'moral sanitation' of the immoral bodies of young men and women.²³²

However, while industrial washing machines ensured a more thorough standard of cleanliness throughout the workhouse institution, they are linked in investigative articles to the failure of workhouse girls in domestic service and are thus implicitly identified as a causative factor in their slide into prostitution.²³³ Aside from the contaminating influence of corrupt women, the most fundamental element in a girl's inevitable descent to the streets is identified as the failure of the workhouse system to prepare her for a life as a domestic

²³⁰ 'The Building Exhibition at Manchester', *British Architect*, 10 August 1883, pp. 67-70 (p. 68).

²³¹ 'Moral Sanitation', p. 292.

²³² *Ibid.*

²³³ The new workhouse washing machines also affected poor women in the local area. Women who used to help with the laundry work lost their employment and may have had to become paupers themselves. A report on the new laundry at the Blackburn workhouse states that '[t]he relief committee have for a short time past been sending a number of women to the workhouse to be employed in the old laundry at wages of 2s. 6d. per day. [...] It is, however, obvious that they are now in a position to do without them'. See 'Extension at the Blackburn Workhouse. Opening of a New Laundry', *Weekly Standard and Express*, 10 December 1898, p. 6.

servant. In ‘A Model Workhouse’ (1865) in the *Alexandra Magazine and English Woman’s Journal*, the narrator, who is visiting the house, describes the industrial scale of its domestic operations; in the kitchen there are ‘huge copper cauldrons, scoured to lustrous brightness, and devoted to potatoes, porridge, soup, or tea’ and, in the laundry, ‘under an efficient washerwoman, the elder girls, taking it in turns to be her assistants, are initiated into “getting up” the linen of the establishment’.²³⁴ The elder girls helping in the laundry are ostensibly being schooled in washing clothes, in anticipation of a life in domestic service. However, the institutional scale of cooking and washing has no correspondence to the small family homes in which the girls will likely be placed. As the article ‘Workhouse Sketches’ suggests, girls being sent out to service are doomed to fail because ‘housewifely duties [...] cannot be learned in the bare wards and among the machinery of huge troughs and boilers of a workhouse laundry and kitchen’.²³⁵ The workhouse institution and the daily routines of life inside it bear no similarity to the domestic spaces of the cottage home; girls who are trained to operate machines that cleanse hundreds of garments at a time are at a loss when faced with the manual labour of washing clothes in a tub and wringing them dry. As Power Cobbe explains, their ‘ignorance of the simplest household duties’ results in them being mistreated by their employers and then, ‘[i]n their errands into the street at all hours, the secret of another and all too easy livelihood is revealed to them’.²³⁶ Unable to fulfil their domestic duties due to inadequate training in the workhouse, these girls are tempted into a life of prostitution as an easier means of survival. The hopeless cycle is complete when these young women return to the workhouse, often with an illegitimate child in tow, and instil in other

²³⁴ ‘A Model Workhouse’, *Alexandra Magazine and English Woman’s Journal*, 1 July 1865, pp. 416- 424 (pp. 418, 419).

²³⁵ Power Cobbe, ‘Workhouse Sketches’, p. 454. Several other texts make this point, including ‘The Girl from the Workhouse’, *All the Year Round*, 18 October 1862, pp. 132-136 (p. 132) and Morgan, ‘The Workhouse Girl’, pp. 286-287.

²³⁶ Power Cobbe, quoted in ‘The Workhouse Girl’, p. 285.

workhouse girls the ‘ambition to come back to the house young mothers too’.²³⁷ It seems, then, that the physical cleanliness inaugurated by new appliances is not necessarily analogous to moral cleanliness, as hoped in ‘Moral Sanitation’.

Clara Balfour’s short story *Toil and Trust, or The Life-Story of Patty the Workhouse Girl* (1860) gives voice to the difficulties faced by pauper girls going into domestic service. Patty, a hardworking pauper girl, longs to be sent out to service, but is never selected because of her crooked shoulder. Of the girls who are hired out from this workhouse, two thirds do not remain in their positions and return instead to the house.²³⁸ The text observes that ‘[s]ome of these poor things had really been harshly used – but the most having been born and reared in the workhouse and used to its routine, did not like the poor places they were taken to, and did not try to succeed – wished in fact to return, and came back idle, and sometimes dissolute’.²³⁹ The girls’ lack of impetus to make a success of their positions is implicitly blamed upon a workhouse system that does not equip them with the skills needed in a domestic home. In fact, life in the workhouse is initially represented as preferable to the gruelling servitude expected in a family home. When Patty is finally selected for a job as domestic servant, she finds that

poor as her fare had been in the workhouse, it was worse here. [...] Patty was first up in the morning, making the fires, and cleaning up the house; [...] she had to [...] clean all the day long, until late in the evening.²⁴⁰

The text draws attention to the unmanageable workload placed upon young girls in the poor families that they are sent to live with. It is only Patty’s determination to succeed in service that enables her to overcome the deficiencies in her training.

²³⁷ ‘The Girl from the Workhouse’, p. 133.

²³⁸ Clara Balfour’s story *Toil and Trust, or The Life-Story of Patty the Workhouse Girl* purports to be a true outline of the life of a workhouse girl. In the ‘Preface’, Balfour relates part of a conversation with the master of a workhouse in Kent: ‘He said, “the boys often turned out well:– but as for the girls, they were idle and impudent; and when places out at service were obtained for them, they somehow were sure to drift back again to the Workhouse in disgrace.’ Mrs C. L. Balfour, *Toil and Trust; or The Life Story of Patty the Workhouse Girl* (London: “British Workman” Office, 1860), p. i.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 23-24.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

The insufficiency of the training given to workhouse girls, and the harsh conditions meted out to them in service, is similarly explored in a chapter of the fictional narrative ‘Workhouse Visiting’ in the *Monthly Packet*. In the text, Mrs Cardyce, a wealthy local woman, finds personal fulfilment through becoming a friend to workhouse girls. The pauper girls whom she invites to her house have been rendered dull looking and ‘machine-like’ from the institutional regimes of the workhouse but, under Mrs Cardyce’s familial attentions, blossom into affectionate children.²⁴¹ The girls, who have no experience of a family household, are unfamiliar with the domestic interior of a house. Mrs Cardyce’s friendship is intended to educate the girls about what a home is and to compensate for the shortfalls of the workhouse training system; as the narrator points out, ‘[n]o “method” of teaching is of much use with my children, and so I trust to the quiet influence of my parlour, where they see me going on with my ordinary employments’.²⁴² The ‘quiet influence’ of this bourgeois woman’s home has an overtly educative purpose and is intended to familiarise the girls with the housewifely skills necessary for a life in service. However, this training cannot prepare Alice, one of the girls, for the hard routine of servitude that awaits her when she is engaged as a servant.²⁴³ When Mrs Cardyce visits Alice in service, she is shocked at her transformation from a ‘clean, rosy-cheeked workhouse child’ to a ‘pale, tired-looking girl in dingy slatternly attire’.²⁴⁴ Her ‘slatternly’ appearance is suggestive of the inevitable downward spiral her morals would have taken if not for the interference of Mrs Cardyce. Alice has to do all the heavy work of the house and her ineptitude is harshly criticised by her employer, who complains that ‘I sent her to the grocer’s [and] she couldn’t tell what mixed tea meant, and at

²⁴¹ This is the description given to the pauper girl Nancy. Caroline M. Hallett, ‘Workhouse Visiting’, *Monthly Packet*, 1 July 1880, pp. 52- 63 (p. 55).

²⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 54.

²⁴³ The neglectful attitude of the authorities towards workhouse girls going into service is apparent in the master’s comment that ‘[s]he’s got to go where *we* like’. *Ibid.*, p. 60.

²⁴⁴ Caroline M. Hallett, ‘Workhouse Visiting’, *Monthly Packet*, 1 August 1880, pp. 143-155 (p. 144).

the draper's she didn't know the difference between calico and glazed lining'.²⁴⁵ Alice's ignorance of everyday domestic items, which is due to her upbringing in the workhouse, results in her being treated unkindly by her mistress.

Of the three girls featured in the story, however, it is Nancy's fate that most acutely illustrates the exploitation and mistreatment of workhouse girls by an uncaring society. Nancy is sent thirty miles away to the seaport town of Rokeport, which Mrs Cardyce remembers for its 'foulness, griminess and misery in the back streets' and for the 'flaring prosperity in the better ones, of that kind that supports many public-houses'.²⁴⁶ When she learns where Nancy is being sent, Mrs Cardyce comforts the remaining girls with biblical readings, and the text describes how

we went on to read of the fine linen, clean and white, which is the righteousness of the saints, and I told them how they must guard their souls from spots of defilement, 'for each sin,' I said, 'each wrong word leaves a spot on the soul, just as ink leaves a spot on a clean, fair white dress'.²⁴⁷

Mrs Cardyce uses the analogy of stained linen to explain to the girls the corruptive effects of sin upon the soul. The religious subtext that underpins the narrative draws attention to her ministrations to the girls as a form of moral fortification against the iniquities of society.

Alone in Rokeport, Nancy, with the taint of pauperism upon her, is cruelly mistreated. When Mrs Cardyce visits the town to enquire about Nancy, she learns that the girl has been (falsely) accused of stealing spirits and turned out late at night without her wages; she eventually traces her to a seedy lodging house where she is dying of consumption. Nancy's subsequent death constructs her in the text as a martyr of both the workhouse system and an exploitative society. The struggles faced by Nancy and Alice illustrate the perils faced by workhouse girls when they go to service: they are unequipped with the basic household skills, underpaid and unsupervised by their employers, who allow them to roam the streets at night.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁶ Hallett, 'Workhouse Visiting', 1 July 1880, p. 59.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

Though neither Nancy or Alice do become prostitutes, the text implies that this is due to the friendship proffered to them by their middle-class patron; Mrs Cardyce's wish to set up a formal tie of friendship that is recognised by employers results in her organising the Girls' Friendly Society for workhouse girls, in order to preserve her moral influence over them when they leave the workhouse.

In the nineteenth-century imagination, the workhouse is at different moments representative of a thoroughly sanitised space and a site of dangerous filth. Analysis of narratives featuring the workhouse generates contradictory meanings about cleanliness: the sanitising of the workhouse space is at once healing, punitive, reforming, macabre and, as in the *Lancet* reports, deliberately misleading. The relationship between cleanliness and morality, explicit in Chadwick's sanitary *Report*, is complicated by concerns about the moral dirt that is spread as an implicit result of workhouse cleaning rituals. These texts reveal deep-seated anxieties about a moral contagion that even the most scrupulous sanitary regimes could not eradicate. An examination of the workhouse space through the lens of cleanliness and dirt thus reveals the social and politically-charged values that informed the representation of the poor in the nineteenth century.

Chapter Two

Master of the Workhouse

In the 1869 edition of the Poor-Law manual for masters and matrons of workhouses, the master is described as ‘the most important officer engaged in the administration of the relief of the poor’.¹ The official guide prescribes the qualifications needed by the master to adequately fulfil this role and sets out the duties that he was required to undertake. The master was expected to oversee the paupers and the day-to-day running of the house, to keep meticulous accounts and to report to the board of guardians.² According to the manual, the ideal workhouse master would ‘[possess] a calm steady temper’, be ‘firm, authoritative and vigilant’, ‘gentle and considerative [*sic*]’ and ‘sober in his diet, cleanly in his person, and orderly in his behaviour’.³ He was also required to be competent at taking registers and inventories, economical in managing the stores, and to have some knowledge of farming and gardening. In contrast to the master, the qualifications needed by the matron were largely domestic; she was required to superintend the cooking, cleaning and washing of the house and, in some instances, to be competent at running a dairy.⁴

The ideal workhouse master and matron were employed together as a married couple. In 1835, an advertisement in the *Ipswich Journal* for a ‘Governor of a Workhouse’ asked for:

[a] man and his wife (of suitable age) without incumbrance to take charge of a Workhouse. Salary 50£. a year with Board and Lodging. None need apply who cannot

¹ William Golden Lumley, *Manuals of the Duties of Poor Law Officers. Master and Matron of the Workhouse*, 2nd edition (London: Knight and Co, 1869), p. v.

² Guardians from each parish were elected under the New Poor Law to sit on a board representing the affairs of the union and to oversee the workhouse master. For more information on the role of guardians, see M. A. Crowther, *The Workhouse System 1834-1929* (Cambridge: Methuen, 1983), pp. 75-80.

³ Lumley, *Master and Matron of the Workhouse*, p. vi.

⁴ The duties of workhouse masters and matrons have been discussed, amongst others, by Crowther in *The Workhouse System*, pp. 113-134, Norman Longmate in *The Workhouse* (London: Temple Smith, 1974), pp. 98-106 and Robert M. Gutchen in ‘Masters of Workhouses under the New Poor Law’, *Local Historian*, 16 (1984), 93-99.

afford satisfactory testimonials of their capacity for filling the situation, as well as for sobriety and integrity.⁵

As the advertisement indicates, the master and matron, though married, should be without the ‘incumbrance’ of children. The objections against the master and matron having children who lived with them are outlined in a letter issued by the Poor Law Board and included in the manual. The letter points out that,

[t]he residence of persons in a workhouse, who are neither inmates subject to its discipline, nor officers controlled by its regulations, has an unavoidable tendency to interfere with the good order and management of the establishment; and where these persons are young children, the time and attention of their parents are apt to be given to them, instead of to the performance of the duties of such parents in the workhouse.⁶

The text suggests that, as children of officers were exempt from both the ‘discipline’ meted out to paupers and the ‘regulations’ imposed on staff, they were potentially transgressive figures in the workhouse. In addition to this, the letter raises the concern that these children would distract officers from their proper duties in the time needed to care for them.⁷ The uncomfortable integration of the public sphere of the institution and the private sphere of the home is suggested in the letter; though the institution was the master’s domestic home, he was always on duty and encouraged not to think of it as such.

The salary for workhouse masters was low and could vary greatly according to the size and location of the workhouse.⁸ The above advertisement from 1835 offers a joint salary of £50 for the master and matron; in 1856, just over twenty years later, the Merthyr Tydfil union offered £60 for a master and £40 for a matron to manage the 210 inmates who were

⁵ ‘Governor of a Workhouse’, *Ipswich Journal; And Suffolk, Norfolk, Essex and Cambridge Advertiser*, 21 March 1835, p. [3].

⁶ ‘Circular Letter of the Poor Law Board as to the Children of Workhouse Officers’, Appendix II in Lumley, *Master and Matron of the Workhouse*, pp. 170-171 (p. 170).

⁷ The letter goes on to point out that, if necessary, some relaxation of this rule may be made for the master and matron ‘under proper restrictions’, but that they must pay for the cost of each child’s maintenance themselves. *Ibid.*

⁸ Longmate notes that ‘the Poor Law service did not attract men and women who were well-qualified, much less dedicated, largely because the rates of pay were from the first ridiculously low. A constant grievance was that, at every level, workhouse staff received less than their opposite numbers doing comparable work in prison’. See Longmate, *The Workhouse*, p. 105.

then resident in the workhouse.⁹ It seems that some rate payers expected the same austerity applied to the paupers to similarly apply to the remuneration of workhouse staff: a letter to the editor of the *Leicester Chronicle* in 1851 expresses the writer's outrage at the proposal to increase the salaries of the master and matron of the Leicester union workhouse to '£150 a year, with 16s per head for rations, making £191 12s. 0d. in money, besides house room, coals, candles, &c'.¹⁰ The writer deems this salary 'monstrously extravagant' and suggests that the rate payers 'will not quietly and approvingly look on while the hardly-earned money of the industrious is lavishly expended on Workhouse officials'.¹¹

The perceived need for economy also extended to the master's living apartments. As Kathryn Morrison points out, '[the] master's social status was not much higher than that of his charges, and so it was important that the fittings and fixtures of his quarters were suitably modest'.¹² The plain lodgings, designed for occupants of low status, together with the poor salary inevitably attracted applicants from the lower end of the social strata who were often the least qualified to be placed in charge of paupers. In fact, the manual specifically states that '[i]t is very useful that he should be acquainted with the habits and course of life of the poor classes', suggesting that a desirable master was one who was himself not too far removed from the realms of pauperdom.¹³

Although the manual introduces the master as the 'most important officer' of the house, the autonomy of this figure is subverted by the rigid guidelines set out for his conduct.

⁹ 'Merthyr Tydfil Union', in 'Advertisements & Notices', *Bristol Mercury*, 12 January 1856, p. 4. The master of the York Union in 1877 asked the guardians to increase his salary of £115 by £20 a year as he was then managing almost 500 paupers. In support of this request, it was pointed out that the master of Hereford received £100 for 267 inmates, the master of Barnsley Union £145 for 309 inmates and the master of Hull £140 for 470 inmates. See the report 'York Board of Guardians', *York Herald*, 26 January 1877, p. 3. The salaries listed are presumably joint ones for both the master and matron.

¹⁰ 'The Salary of the Master and Matron of the Leicester Union Workhouse', *Leicester Chronicle: or Commercial and Agricultural Advertiser*, 14 June 1851, p. [3].

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² Kathryn Morrison, *The Workhouse: A Study of Poor-Law Buildings in England* (Swindon: English Heritage at the National Monuments Record Centre, 1999), p. 83. Crowther notes that, prior to 1834, parishes had sometimes employed a pauper as master. See Crowther, *The Workhouse System*, p. 115.

¹³ Lumley, *Master and Matron of the Workhouse*, p. viii.

The manual invests the master with authority, but it simultaneously denies him the independence to make his own decisions; the text states that ‘[i]t is clear that the Master and Matron must be controlled and regulated by the provisions and regulations which have been prescribed for the government of the Workhouse’.¹⁴ The introduction draws attention to the shift of power from the master to the guardians with the passing of the Poor Law Amendment Act: prior to 1834, a master ‘had very often no superior authority to control his conduct’, but now the master of a new workhouse is ‘responsible to [...the Board of Guardians...], and must obey their orders’.¹⁵

As the public face of the workhouses, reports about workhouse masters proliferated during the nineteenth century. Some of these accounts suggest that the master and matron did indeed live up to the ideal set out by the Poor Law manual. A letter from a workhouse visitor, published in the *Journal of the Workhouse Visiting Society* (1862), cannot praise these house officials enough. The visitor writes of her wish that others will one day meet the ‘excellent’ matron and her husband, the master: ‘I think it would quite interest you to see what their work has been for thirty-five years in that Union; and for the last few years it is a complete self-devotion of life to it; they never leave it for a day. It is a very bright exception to the general Unions.’¹⁶ This is the opinion of a lady visitor, but other texts suggest that, in some instances, the workhouse master was thought of with gratitude and admiration by the paupers that he ruled over. The poem ‘A Model Workhouse Master’ (1870), for example, was apparently written by a pauper inmate for the master, Mr Brokenshire, of the Chorlton union workhouse and glorifies this officer and his paternal treatment of the paupers. Two of the stanzas read:

A sympathiser with distress,
A father to the fatherless,
And Edward Brokenshire we bless!

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.xiii-xiv.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.viii-ix.

¹⁶ ‘Correspondence’, *Journal of the Workhouse Visiting Society*, XIX (1862), 635-639 (p. 638).

Our Governor.

And bless his gentle, tender wife!
 Protect her health, protract her life!
 And shield her from all ill and strife!
 Our Governor.¹⁷

These accounts, and others like them, suggest that there were many masters and matrons who were kindly and efficient in their roles. As the letter from the lady visitor implies, however, these devoted masters are the ‘exception’ rather than the rule in nineteenth-century representation. In the majority of workhouse texts, the workhouse master is depicted as incompetent and unsuited to the role at best, and cruel and power crazed at worst. In this chapter, I examine these dominant constructions of the workhouse master in contemporary culture and explore the problems of authority and power that are inherent in this shady figure.

The Master’s Disciplinary Eye

In the deterrent workhouses of the nineteenth century, the master’s power over the paupers seems to reside in the idea of his disciplinary gaze. The Poor Law manual emphasises the acute observational skills required by the workhouse master, who must be ‘authoritative and vigilant’, ‘ever active in his supervision of the Workhouse and the inmates, [and] careful in watching the various incidents and accidents’.¹⁸ The importance placed upon the master’s scrutiny of the household goings on suggests that discipline is maintained, in part, by his watchful gaze. Similarly, the matron, as an extension of her husband’s disciplinary eye, should also be ‘active and vigilant in her supervision’, ‘watchful over the sick’ and ‘constantly engaged in the supervision of the House’.¹⁹ Central to the preservation of order is

¹⁷ ‘A Model Workhouse Master’, *Nottinghamshire Guardian*, 1 July 1870, p. 7.

¹⁸ Lumley, *Master and Matron of the Workhouse*, p. vi.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. x, xi.

the daily inspection of the inmates by these two officials. Under the section of the manual subtitled ‘Discipline and Diet of the Paupers’, Article 103 decrees that, after rising,

the names of the paupers shall be called over by the Master and the Matron respectively, in the several wards provided for the second, third, fifth and sixth classes, when every pauper belonging to the respective wards shall be present, and shall answer to his name, and be inspected by the Master and Matron respectively.²⁰

The inserted footnote explains that this inspection is not only to ensure that no paupers have absconded, but so that ‘every pauper of these classes may every day be necessarily brought under their attention’.²¹ The disciplinary intention of the roll call is reflected in the fact that it is applicable only to the able-bodied inmates: the article omits mention of the classes of the infirm and the children. These daily inspections create a hierarchy of power in the house which hinges upon the concept of the inspecting eye.

The architectural designs of workhouses testify to the importance of the supervisory gaze and seem to have been influenced by Bentham’s late-eighteenth century plan for a panopticon prison.²² The title page of Bentham’s *Panopticon; or, The Inspection-House* (1791) promulgates the design’s ability to be applied to ‘any sort of establishment, in which persons [...] are to be kept under inspection’ and, in particular, to ‘prisons’, ‘workhouses’ and ‘poor-houses’.²³ The plan depicts a circular-shaped building, with a central lodge for the superintendent (the inspector), and single cells for the inmates around the circumference (fig.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

²¹ *Ibid.* Michel Foucault explores the disciplinary function of the inspecting gaze in his analysis of ‘Panopticism’. In this text, he describes the measures to be taken in a town if it should be beset by plague, which include the confinement of the town’s inhabitants to their houses and a daily inspection of the residents: every day the inspector ‘gets all the inhabitants to appear at the windows [...]; he calls each of them by name; informs himself as to the state of each and every one of them’. The inspection is a method of imposing order upon the plague, which ‘stands for all forms of confusion and disorder’. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 196, 199. The workhouse master’s inspection of the inmates is a similar exercise in observation and discipline.

²² Morrison points out that ‘[a] new approach to workhouse architecture seems to have been inspired by the Utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1758-1832) who, in 1798, extended his interest from the institutionalisation of convicts to that of paupers’. See Morrison, *The Workhouse*, p. 33. Bentham applied the panopticon to paupers in Jeremy Bentham, *Pauper Management Improved: Particularly by means of an Application of the Panopticon Principle of Construction* (London: Sold by R. Baldwin, 1812).

²³ Jeremy Bentham, *Panopticon; or, The Inspection House [...] in a Series of Letters, Written in the Year 1787 [...]* (1791), in *The Works of Jeremy Bentham*, ed. John Bowring (Edinburgh: Simpkin, Marshall, & Co., no date), pp. 37-172 (p. 37).

1). An inspector in the lodge would be able to see into each and every cell, while his own presence would be concealed from the occupants of those cells by blinds. Not only would the inmates' actions be liable to constant scrutiny, but so too would be every sound they made: the plan suggests that small tubes might pass from the cells to the lodge, so that 'the slightest whisper' would be audible to the inspector.²⁴ The panopticon is described as relying upon 'the well known and most effectual contrivances for *seeing without being seen*' and so would facilitate the disciplining of inmates by creating the impression that they were always under surveillance.²⁵ As Bentham points out, 'the greater chance there is, of a given person's being at a given time actually under inspection, the more strong will be the persuasion – the more *intense* [...] the *feeling*, he has of his being so'.²⁶ The superintendent's apartments would thus be furnished to provide for his 'complete and constant habitation' in the panopticon, so as to give him an '*apparent omnipresence*' and to inculcate a constant feeling of scrutiny in the inmates.²⁷ The architectural design locates power in the inspector's lodge and, in particular, in the inspector's disciplinary eye.

Although Bentham's penitentiary was never built, the deterrent workhouses of the nineteenth century were informed by similar principles of inspection and surveillance, particularly with regards to a centralised hub of authority. The most widely adopted architectural plan for New Poor Law workhouses was Sampson Kempthorne's hexagonal design.²⁸ The 1836 *Companion to the Almanac* includes an illustration of Kempthorne's

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

²⁶ *Ibid.* Foucault points out that, in the panopticon, '[v]isibility is a trap'. For an analysis of Bentham's panopticon in relation to power and discipline see Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, pp. 200-209 (p. 200).

²⁷ Bentham, *Panopticon*, p. 45.

²⁸ Sampson Kempthorne was appointed official architect to the Poor Law Commission. His designs for radial square or hexagonal-shaped workhouses were the most widely implemented and centred around a supervisory hub from which the master could overlook the paupers in their yards. The square design was divided up by buildings arranged in a cross shape to provide four yards, and the hexagon by a Y-shaped building which provided six yards. Both radial designs facilitated the segregation and inspection of paupers. See Morrison, *The Workhouse*, pp. 46-47.

Abingdon workhouse (fig. 2), completed in 1835. The image appears under the section heading ‘Public Improvements’ along with a description of the architectural plan:

[t]he figure of the plan is a hexagon, formed by the external walls; the three main buildings meet in the centre, forming a Y. In the centre building are the governor’s rooms, for the inspection of the whole establishment.²⁹

Paupers in the workhouse were segregated according to characteristics of sex, age and health, and the hexagonal form of the building, providing six separate yards, reflects this requirement for classification.³⁰ The architectural design allowed for the master of Abingdon, from his centralised living quarters on the second and third floors, to look down into each of the yards; according to the text, he was also assigned a ‘room of observation’ on the first floor from which to oversee each class of paupers.³¹ As in the panopticon, Kempthorne’s design constructs the master’s gaze as a disciplinary power, the fear of which works, theoretically at least, to subdue the various classes of inmates into good behaviour.

Though the hexagonal design is perhaps the closest to the realisation of the inspection principle promulgated by the panopticon, other non-hexagonal designs for workhouses, such as Kempthorne’s radial square plan, similarly locate authority in the centre of the building.³² Amongst plans submitted to the board of guardians for a Lincolnshire workhouse was one by Christopher Eales, based upon a square plan, which was later published in the *Architectural Magazine* (1838, fig. 3).³³ In the design, the master’s bedroom is situated directly above the

²⁹ ‘Public Improvements’, *Companion to the Almanac; or, Year-Book of General Information for 1836* (London: Baldwin and Cradock, 1836), pp. 214-237 (p. 236).

³⁰ For information on the classification of the paupers, see Felix Driver, *Power and Pauperism: the Workhouse System, 1834-1884* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 65.

³¹ ‘Public Improvements’, p. 236. The illustration of Abingdon workhouse also appeared on the front cover of the *Mirror of Literature, Amusement, and Instruction*, the image now set against a gloomy-looking sky. For the image, see ‘The Poor Law Amendment Act’, *Mirror of Literature, Amusement, and Instruction*, 27 February 1836, pp. [129]-130 (p. 129).

³² The central supervisory hub was not just a feature of New Poor Law architecture; Morrison notes that the first workhouse to have a central inspection lodge was Alverstoke House of Industry in Hampshire, built during the years 1799 to 1801 and that, before this, the master’s quarters were usually on the outskirts of the building. For more details, see Morrison, *The Workhouse*, pp. 34-35.

³³ Eales’s architectural design was not ultimately selected by the guardians for their workhouse. For a description of the plan see Christopher Eales, ‘Design for a Union Workhouse’, *Architectural Magazine, and*

chapel in the centre of the workhouse on the first floor, and the matron's is located above his on the second floor. The positioning of the master's rooms directly above the chapel draws attention to the central building as the locus of power and aligns the master's inspecting eye with that of God's. Parlours for the master and matron are located on either side of the master's room and lead into the able-bodied men and women's dormitories respectively. The close proximity of the dormitories to the master's quarters speaks to ideas of surveillance and control; the plan shows that the dormitories, like the dining-hall, are classified into first and second-class sections, with those in need of the most surveillance (second-class inmates) sleeping nearer to the master's rooms and those in need of less surveillance (first-class inmates) housed further away.

The inspection principle is also implicit in other non-radial workhouse designs.³⁴ The description of Scarborough new workhouse, published in the *Illustrated London News* with an illustration (1860; fig. 4), points out that the institution has been designed so that '[t]he governor's apartments occupy a central position, and are arranged that he possesses the fullest command of, and is in the closest approximation with, every ward of the establishment'.³⁵ The building is thus organised so that the master's authority radiates out into each of the various wards; the architectural plan enables the master to 'command' the workhouse, suggesting that his authority is bound up with his line of sight. This is also the case in the description of the Risbridge union workhouse in the *Illustrated London News*, in which '[t]he master's residence is placed in the centre, whence he has communication with all the wards by corridors, after the model-prison system'.³⁶ In the image of the Scarborough

Journal of Improvement in Architecture, Building, and Furnishing, and in the Various Arts and Trades Connected Therewith, 5 November 1838, pp. 510-514.

³⁴ Morrison notes that '[i]n corridor-plan workhouses the master still occupied the centre of the building, but the polygonal hub, and with it the notion that the paupers could be supervised from a single vantage point, was modified or abandoned. In practice, the polygonal hub may not have proved as useful as had been expected. Paupers could only be observed in their yards, and masters had neither the time nor the capability to observe every yard at once'. See Morrison, *The Workhouse*, p. 89.

³⁵ 'Scarborough New Workhouse', *Illustrated London News*, 18 February 1860, p. 156.

³⁶ 'The New Risbridge Union Workhouse', *Illustrated London News*, 2 April 1859, pp. 332-333 (p. 332).

workhouse, the master's quarters are the most visibly dominant part of the building as atop them is a 'crown[ing] [...] tower which furnishes a very efficient system of ventilation'.³⁷ To prospective paupers approaching the building, this high tower must have suggested the oppressive gaze of the master. Unlike these two workhouses, the plan for the new Birmingham workhouse, published in the *Builder* in 1852, locates the master's quarters to the far end of the workhouse rather than in a central inspection lodge. However, the description of the plan explains that the main building has 'iron galleries at each floor, for supervision by the officers only. This arrangement gives great facility for effective ventilation and inspection'.³⁸ It seems that the facilitation of the master's disciplinary gaze is still very much at the heart of this architectural design.

In the investigative article 'A Country Workhouse' (1867), published in *All the Year Round*, the first-person narrator draws attention to the penitentiary-like aspect of workhouse design.³⁹ The workhouse is represented as '[a] younger brother of the Millbank Penitentiary, who has settled down to agricultural pursuits, with a surly regret for the turnkeys and warders, the handcuffs and punishment cells'.⁴⁰ The architecture is calculated to exert control over the inmates: the building's 'small narrow windows and high walls' demarcate the limits of the paupers' gaze and emphasise the punitive intentions of the institution.⁴¹ Though essentially well-meaning, the workhouse master's 'love of order and discipline' renders him inept at caring for vulnerable people. As the narrator points out, the master 'looks as if he could fell an ox' and seems better suited to a job as 'boatswain', 'drill-sergeant' or 'gang-

³⁷ 'Scarborough New Workhouse', p. 156.

³⁸ 'Birmingham New Workhouse', *Builder*, 31 January 1852, pp. 71-73 (p. 71).

³⁹ Felix Driver points out that '[c]ritics of the new Poor Law were quick to exploit the apparent similarities between the architecture of the new workhouses and model prisons'. See Driver, *Power and Pauperism*, p. 61.

⁴⁰ [J. C. Parkinson], 'A Country Workhouse', *All the Year Round*, 14 December 1867, pp. 16-20 (p. 17). The description of the building as being built to the 'well-known windmill pattern, with the four wings for wards and the centre for the master's house', suggests that this workhouse is based upon Kempthorne's radial square design. *Ibid.*, pp. 16-17.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

master'.⁴² The master's obsession with the structural aspects of the house results in his neglect of the inmates, who are 'mere accessories, pawns on the chess-board, of quite subordinate interest to the prime function of keeping the house in order'.⁴³ When the narrator questions the master about the windows, which are placed too high for the paupers to look out from, his address goes unheard because the master 'has discovered a spot upon the white wall and is busy removing it with his pocket-handkerchief as tenderly as if the coarse size and whitewash were a child'.⁴⁴ Although workhouse design was intended to facilitate the observation of the paupers, in this narrative, the master's obsession with the orderliness of the building results, ironically, in his blindness to the paupers' welfare.

The master of 'A Country Workhouse' is unsuited to caring for the poor, but he is ignorant rather than deliberately cruel. By contrast, the pictorial representation of the master in Augustus Pugin's 'Contrasted Residences for the Poor' (fig. 5), which appeared in his book of architectural designs, *Contrasts* (1841), constructs the master as a sadistic tyrant. In this image, the octagonal-shaped workhouse is divided into eight walled yards, which segregate the various classes of paupers. The dividing structures radiate out from a high central tower, from which the all-seeing master can look down upon all the inmates. Five smaller vignettes to the left and the bottom of the modern image depict what Pugin saw as the worst atrocities of New Poor Law workhouses, including the incarceration and abuse of paupers, and the disposal of their bodies to anatomists. A vignette in the left margin represents the formidable-looking master, who is surrounded by disciplinary symbols: he holds a pair of handcuffs in his left hand, a cat o' nine tails in his right, and stands before a wall hung with chains. A second vignette, entitled 'Enforcing Discipline', shows the master violently imposing his rule in the workhouse. In this illustration, the master points his finger threateningly towards the half-collapsed figure of a woman, who is being dragged away from

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 17.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

her crying children towards a barred and padlocked cell. The associated factuality of the architectural genre inflects the vignettes with a greater sense of realism; their publication in a book of architecture implicitly suggests their ‘truthful’ representation of the workhouse.

The panopticon design of the modern workhouse is contrasted with the ecclesiastic design of the ancient poorhouse pictured below it. Unlike the modern house, this aesthetic-looking building is open plan and there is no central inspector’s lodge: the highest point of the building is the church tower, an architectural feature which implies that the poor men are disciplined by the watchful eye of God alone. By contrast to the tyrannical gaoler of the modern institution, the master of this ancient house is depicted as a religious minister giving alms to the needy and enforcing discipline by preaching the word of God. The modern poorhouse contains no vestiges of a religious building and, by implication, is also devoid of the values of Christianity.⁴⁵ A spire is just visible in the background of this modern image, a pictorial detail which suggests the physical divide between the New Poor Law and religious charity. In the modern poor house, the all-seeing eye of God is usurped by the eye of the despotic master.

Scandal at the Workhouse

Pugin’s ‘Contrasted Residences for the Poor’ suggests the potential for discipline to slide into abuse. In their coverage of the workhouse, many anti-Poor Law publications sought to paint a very black picture of the workhouse master; as the public face of these institutions, the master was criminalised by propagandists as representative of the cruelties of the New Poor Law. The lack of compassion shown by masters to the poor was frequently reported by the newspapers, which were full of incidents recounting how starving and vulnerable paupers

⁴⁵ Driver suggests that ‘[s]uch iconography [...] was supposed to represent, in landscape form, what Pugin claimed to be the degeneration of English moral and aesthetic values’. Driver, *Power and Pauperism*, p. 61.

were mistreated in the workhouse or even refused admittance to it in the first place, usually on the grounds that they belonged to a different parish. A case was brought against the master of the Clerkenwell workhouse in 1859, for example, for refusing to admit a 16-year-old girl, apparently on the grounds that the term ‘destitute’ was not used in her application for shelter.⁴⁶ She was found sitting on a doorstep in the early hours of the morning by a policeman, having been first turned away from the St Pancras workhouse. Even when accompanied by the policeman and a sergeant, she was still refused entry to this institution and told to go to the Clerkenwell workhouse, from which she was also turned away. The magistrate involved in the case against the Clerkenwell master expressed the opinion that ‘the masters of workhouses read Poor Law reports and regulations until they thought of nothing else and their hearts grew harder’.⁴⁷ Because discipline within the workhouse was largely left to the ‘discretion’ of one man and his interpretation of the regulations, accusations of abuse and persecution were inevitable. In reality, an overwhelming number of accusations, ranging from embezzlement to manslaughter, were brought against workhouse masters.⁴⁸

The difficulty in separating legitimate punishment from abuse in the workhouse is apparent in the charges brought against Mr Lawrence, the master of the Bath union workhouse. In 1839, a series of letters passed between the Poor Law Commissioners and the workhouse officials, on the subject of the investigation into the charges of cruelty, rape and theft brought by the clerk and the chaplain against the master. One of the most serious charges relates to the then pregnant inmate, Rebecca Collets, who the master locked up overnight in a freezing cell. Referring to this incident in a letter to the guardians, the chaplain

⁴⁶ ‘Unfeeling Conduct of a London Workhouse Master’, *Leicester Chronicle: or, Commercial and Agricultural Advertiser*, 22 January 1859, p. [1].

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Crowther points out that ‘[u]pon the shoulders of the workhouse master fell most directly the burden of deciding how far the workhouse should deter the poor [...and...] he had wide discretion to treat paupers with harshness or sympathy’. See Crowther, *The Workhouse System*, p. 114.

questions ‘[i]s not this cruelty, barbarity, almost surpassing belief?’⁴⁹ Despite the gravity of the offences against the master, however, the guardians’ correspondence demonstrates their loyalties to their master and concludes that the charges against the master were ‘generally but of trivial importance, and most of them of a frivolous and vexatious character’.⁵⁰ The Assistant Commissioner’s examination of the case is included with the documents, in which he affirms that the master is innocent of ‘undue severity’ towards Rebecca.⁵¹ The fact that the Assistant Commissioner thought it relevant to mention that Rebecca was ‘one of the low prostitutes of this city’, implies that, in his eyes at least, her reputation was itself a justification of the master’s actions.⁵² Another Assistant Commissioner involved in the case refused to condone the incarceration of a woman assumed to be pregnant, but added in his correspondence that it was clear that Lawrence ‘only considered he was performing his duty’.⁵³ His report refers to the fact that Lawrence recorded the incident in the workhouse punishment book; it seems that the master’s act of documentation went some way towards legitimising his actions towards the pauper.⁵⁴

The idea that Lawrence was only doing his ‘duty’ is akin to a pardon for the master and draws attention to the entanglement of ideas of abuse and punishment. Innocent in the eyes of the authorities, Lawrence continued in his post as master, but the chaplain, ironically, was dismissed for what the guardians deemed his ‘incompetency and unfitness for his office’.⁵⁵ In the guardians’ correspondence, the chaplain is accused of attempting to ‘neutralize the authority of the Master, and tacitly encourage insubordination and a spirit of

⁴⁹ *Bath Union Workhouse. A Copy of the Proceedings in the Investigation into the Conduct of the Master of the Bath Union Workhouse [...]*, House of Commons Papers (489), XLIV.111 (Great Britain: House of Commons, Parliament, 1839), p. 7.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 22. The fact of Rebecca’s pregnancy is disputed in the correspondence. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁵⁴ As Crowther points out, ‘Guardians and central authority both tended to dismiss offences perpetrated in the pursuit of “discipline”’. Crowther, *The Workhouse System*, p. 122.

⁵⁵ *Bath Union Workhouse*, p. 29.

combination among the dissolute and refractory inmates of the house'.⁵⁶ Despite the severity of the allegations against the master, the guardians upheld his authority, and the chaplain, for challenging the master's rule, was branded a troublemaker and unceremoniously dismissed.

One of the most sensational cases of abuse was that brought against the master (Mr Miles) of the Hoo union workhouse in 1840. In the article 'Alleged Cruelty of the Master of the Hoo Union Workhouse to Pauper Children' (1840), *The Times* details the lurid charges that were heard before Rochester magistrates' court in regards to the master's flogging of children and focuses, in particular, upon the indecency of the whippings which he meted out to young girls.⁵⁷ *The Times* sensationalises the case by suggesting that it is too 'painful and sickening' to go into specifics, but nevertheless reports that,

the master of the Hoo Union workhouse [...] stripped female children of a tender age, and some approaching to puberty, and flogged them with [a] rod of birch in a most indelicate and savage manner repeatedly. Their necks and shoulders were laid bare to their waists, and sometimes their persons were exposed by the removal of their nether garments, they being laid upon a table, and beaten until the blood flowed.⁵⁸

For *The Times*, the most shocking part of these vicious beatings seems to be that the girls were whipped in a semi-naked state; the comment that some of these girls were 'approaching [...] puberty', insinuates that the floggings may have been sexually motivated.⁵⁹

A subtext of sexual abuse can also be read into an adult former inmate's account of the master's flogging of a thirteen-year-old girl. *The Times* reports that Mary Lowes, an eyewitness, related that 'Master [...] turned up all the clothes [...] Jemima [...] had on, which

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *The Times* was a vehemently anti-Poor Law publication. Crowther points out that 'John Walter, editor of *The Times*, led a vigorous propaganda warfare against [...] workhouses...'. [...] [H]e printed stories accusing the Commissioners of jobbery and the guardians of gross inhumanity towards paupers'. Crowther, *The Workhouse System*, p. 30.

⁵⁸ 'Alleged Cruelty of the Master of the Hoo Union Workhouse to Pauper Children', *The Times*, 24 December 1840, p. 5.

⁵⁹ Although allegations of sexual abuse are never explicitly mentioned, the magistrates also seem to have had this in mind. When nine-year-old Martha Davis deposed that '[w]hile I have been in the house, mistress has been good to me, and master bad', the magistrates questioned what she meant by 'bad'; *The Times* reports that '[a]fter being repeatedly asked if she meant anything else but flogging, she said "No."' 'Hoo Union', *The Times*, 6 January 1841, p. 5.

were only her under-petticoat and chemise, and flogged her on her bare person, holding her down with one hand on her loins'.⁶⁰ She also commented that '[w]hen he flogged [...the girls...] his blood seemed to rise as he went on'.⁶¹ To a modern-day reader, Mary's account of the punishment smacks of sexual abuse.⁶² Miles also seems to have had a possessive streak regarding the punishment of the paupers. It is reported that, when a bruised female inmate died in the infirmary, Miles was angry to find that some of the bruises were inflicted, not by himself, but by the nurse. In her deposition, Mary Lowes claims to have overheard Miles say (about the dead woman) that '[i]f he pleased to put marks on her himself, he did not like [that] anyone else should'.⁶³ Miles's words suggest a sense of ownership over the bodies of the paupers; the bruises on the girls' bodies seem to have functioned as physical marks of his authority. The depraved representation of the master in *The Times* aimed to incite public wrath against the New Poor Law.

Although *The Times* anticipated that readers would be scandalised by the case, the published transcript of the trial records a magistrate's suggestion that the interpretation of the master by the public must differ according to the reader's social class; in the transcript the magistrate asks the chaplain whether he has '[discovered] that the uneducated classes are not so sensitive in their notions and feelings of delicacy as the educated classes?'.⁶⁴ The chaplain replies in the affirmative, suggesting that the 'punishment inflicted by the defendant would not strike the uneducated as being indecent, though it would appear to be very indecent to the educated classes'.⁶⁵ The magistrate thus implies that the educated readers of the newspapers may well have a different construction of the master, and his alleged impropriety, to the

⁶⁰ 'Hoo Union', *The Times*, 7 January 1841, p. 6.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² The perversion of Miles's disciplinary eye is also suggested by his transgression of gendered spaces. While the female wards should have been superintended by the matron and therefore off-limits to the master, Miles appears to have been a regular visitor in the women's dormitories, regardless of the inmates' state of dress. As the adult former inmate, Frances Roberts, deposed: '[h]e came in "more oftener" than mistress'. 'Hoo Union', 6 January 1841, p. 5.

⁶³ 'Hoo Union', 7 January 1841, p. 6.

⁶⁴ 'Hoo Union', *The Times*, 12 January 1841, p. 3.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

lower classes, who are, he suggests, less ‘sensitive’ about issues of modesty and corporal punishment. The confusion between abuse and discipline is also evoked by the guardians’ reluctance to denounce their master. *The Times*, garnering public fury against the guardians, reports that ‘some of them have expressed an opinion so far in his favour as to speak of the scourgings [...] as wholesome and proper correction’.⁶⁶ The words of the chaplain, magistrates and guardians draw attention to abuse and punishment as socially-constructed ideas; while, for the higher social classes, Miles’s actions are grossly improper, the magistrate and guardians suggest that, to the lower echelons of society, the floggings may merely represent an appropriate exercise of discipline and authority.

Not only does *The Times* attack the master, but it also criminalises the officials connected with the workhouse. In an article published on 24th December, *The Times* reports the delays that have prevented the case from coming before the magistrates and speculates scathingly as to whether the Poor Law authorities will ever find that it is not ‘impracticable to proceed’.⁶⁷ The report states that the evidence already heard was ‘defective’ and suggests that ‘it is not difficult to surmise how or by what means it came to pass that some of the worst parts of the evidence were studiously suppressed’.⁶⁸ *The Times* levies accusations at the guardians, suggesting that they are responsible for attempting to hush the matter up; their reluctance to proceed with a prosecution is interpreted as evidence of their corrupt allegiance to the workhouse master.⁶⁹ As *The Times* points out,

[the guardians are] themselves in some degree tainted, inasmuch as they did not exercise a proper watchfulness over the master who was immediately accountable to

⁶⁶ ‘Alleged Cruelty of the Master of the Hoo Union’, p. 5. The *Satirist* comments on the conviction of the master of Hoo Union for flogging pauper girls, suggesting that ‘he will probably have to endure considerable personal inconvenience for his indulgence in that exciting species of amusement’. The article also points out that ‘[t]he ex-master was never in the habit of delegating his duties to others’ and satirises the ‘dutiful’ nature of the punishments which ‘were performed, not only under his eye, but by his hand’. ‘The Late Master of the Hoo Union [...]’, *Satirist; or, the Censor of the Times*, 27 March 1842, p. 103.

⁶⁷ ‘Alleged Cruelty of the Master of the Hoo Union’, p. 5.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁹ The subsequent decision of the guardians not to proceed against the master, reported on 30 December, must have further incensed readers and added strength to the accusations against the guardians. ‘Hoo Union’, *The Times*, 30 December 1840, p. 6.

them; on the contrary, it appears [...] that they reposed an unlimited confidence in him, and that [...] he may be said to have received a kind of *carte blanche* from them.⁷⁰

Blame is thus directed towards the guardians, who should have been responsible for overseeing the conduct of the workhouse master. As in the case of the allegations against Lawrence (of the Bath union workhouse), the articles in *The Times* reveal that the guardians were loath to denounce their own officer. Perhaps due, in part, to the publicity generated by the case, however, the Poor Law Commissioners made the politic decision that Miles, unlike Lawrence, was to be removed from his position as master.⁷¹ Yet, on 26th January, *The Times* published the rumour that Miles would continue to reside at the workhouse in the role of relieving officer, that his wife would remain matron, and that no new master would be appointed. As of 6th April, Miles was still superintendent of the workhouse, and *The Times* bitterly stated ‘[t]hus is public decency outraged’.⁷²

The accusation that the master of the Hoo workhouse received a ‘*carte blanche*’ from the guardians is not unique to this workhouse. The *Lancet* report on the Farnham workhouse, discussed in chapter one, places the blame for the various abuses firmly upon the workhouse master. He is described as ‘a large man, with an imposing presence, a confident manner, and a faculty for talking down any mildly remonstrant guardian’.⁷³ By contrast to the deliberate tyrannies of the master, the report partially exonerates the guardians with the suggestion that they are ‘probably only half-conscious, if conscious at all, of the mischief their own

⁷⁰ ‘Alleged Cruelty of the Master of the Hoo Union’, p. 5.

⁷¹ A letter from Edwin Chadwick (Secretary to the Poor Law Commissioners) to the guardians was sent to *The Times* for publication, suggesting Chadwick’s awareness of the media hype about the case. Chadwick’s letter stresses, however, that Miles’s demotion was due to the ‘indelicacy’ of ‘the exposure of [...] the girls’ [...] persons’ and not ‘in reference to any excess in the punishments inflicted’; his legitimising of corporal punishment as both legal and necessary, directs blame away from the workhouse system as a whole. ‘The Hoo Union’, *The Times*, 23 January 1841, p. 6.

⁷² ‘Hoo Union’, *The Times*, 6 April 1841, p. 6.

⁷³ ‘The Lancet Sanitary Commission for Investigating the State of the Infirmaries of Workhouses. Country Workhouse Infirmaries. No. III. Farnham (Near Aldershot).’, *Lancet*, 19 October 1867, pp. 496-498 (p. 497).

negligence has caused'.⁷⁴ The report suggests that their primary fault was being blind to the 'despotism' of the workhouse master and 'believ[ing] implicitly all the master told them'.⁷⁵ Not content to take the word of the *Lancet*, however, the Poor Law Board launched its own enquiry into the Farnham case. In the official Poor Law report, one guardian is recorded as stating that 'I believe this union has been a *Pandemonium*, but I do not believe it is the fault of the Guardians; as far as my experience goes, I think the late master had too much power'.⁷⁶ Though the master should have been overseen by the guardians, he appears, instead, to have usurped their power.

The most infamous of workhouse masters, however, is perhaps George Catch, who seems to have been obsessed with his own authority. Catch was an ex-policeman, who rose up from the position of porter at the Strand union workhouse to become master of the establishment. After being dismissed for misconduct from the Strand, he took up the position of master at Newington workhouse.⁷⁷ When history repeated itself and Catch received a dismissal from Newington, he became master of the notorious Lambeth workhouse.⁷⁸ The document *Poor Law (Mr Catch)*, printed in 1868, includes official correspondence relative to Catch's conduct in Newington workhouse, which was read by the Lambeth guardians when Catch applied to be master there. The main allegations against Catch relate to his attitude towards other officers in the workhouse, to whom the Poor Law inspector's report concludes he is 'haughty and overbearing'.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 496.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 497.

⁷⁶ *Farnham Union. Copy of the report of Mr. Lambert, poor law inspector, and Dr. Edward Smith, poor law inspector and medical officer of the Poor Law Board [...]*, House of Commons Papers (134), LX.37 (Great Britain: House of Commons, Parliament, 1868), p. 40.

⁷⁷ Ruth Richardson and Brian Hurwitz discuss Catch's campaign against Joseph Rogers, the workhouse medical officer of the Strand. See Ruth Richardson and Brian Hurwitz, 'Joseph Rogers and the Reform of Workhouse Medicine', *History Workshop Journal*, 45 (1997), 218-225 (p. 221).

⁷⁸ For more information on Catch's career, see Longmate, *The Workhouse*, pp. 102-104.

⁷⁹ *Poor Law (Mr. Catch). Copies of letters addressed to the Poor Law Board [...]*, House of Commons Papers (249), LX.1 (Great Britain: House of Commons, Parliament, 1868), p. 5.

Conflicts of power between masters and medical officers were particularly common, due to the lack of clarity about which officer had the final say on infirmary matters.⁸⁰ In Newington workhouse, the infirmary appears to have become the site of the power struggle played out between the doctor and Catch.⁸¹ The doctor, Henry Simmonds, testifies in his deposition to occasions when the master has demonstrated his ‘bullying manner’ and ‘imperious style’.⁸² Catch was apparently loath to relinquish any authority to the medical officer and Simmonds complains that ‘the master tells and causes the nurses to disregard my directions’ and ‘shift[s] [...patients...] from ward to ward, to please his fancy’.⁸³ Catch’s preoccupation with his own authority is evinced by his constant reiteration of his superiority: in one instance, when the doctor requested that milk be given to the patients, the master’s reply was that ‘milk would be given and drank when he thought proper, as he was master there’.⁸⁴ Similarly, in the nurse’s deposition, she recalls an incident when she repeated the doctor’s orders to Catch and was told ‘the doctor be hanged, [...] remember I am master here’.⁸⁵ Catch was ultimately dismissed from Newington workhouse principally due to the libellous charge of a torrid affair which he brought against the doctor and nurse in retaliation. Despite being dismissed from two workhouses, Catch was elected by the guardians of Lambeth as their new workhouse master, although he was eventually removed from this position as well and, having been publically denounced, finally committed suicide.⁸⁶

⁸⁰ As Crowther points out, ‘[f]or much of the nineteenth century the master and the doctor disputed control of the infirmary, and the doctor finally won a qualified victory. In the early years, however, the doctor’s position was less secure than other officers’ because of his annual contract’. Crowther, *The Workhouse System*, p. 127.

⁸¹ The *Lancet* report on Farnham workhouse draws attention to a similar war of authority in the institution, stating that the running of the house was characterised by a ‘despotism on the part of the late master, tempered, however, during the last four years by revolution on the part of the doctor’. ‘The Lancet Sanitary Commission for Investigating the State of the Infirmarys of Workhouses. Country Workhouse Infirmarys. No. III. Farnham (Near Aldershot).’, *Lancet*, 19 October 1867, pp. 496-498 (p. 497). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the medical journal characterises the doctor as a revolutionary force for good, contending with the tyrannical power of the ruling master.

⁸² *Poor Law (Mr Catch)*, p. 8.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 9.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁸⁶ Longmate, *The Workhouse*, pp. 103-104.

Mocking the Master

The sheer volume of accusations brought against various workhouse masters and reported in the papers paints a very disturbing picture of these Poor Law officers. Newspapers were not the only way that news of a workhouse scandal was disseminated, however, and some of the most notorious cases also leached down into popular street literature. Texts like the broadside ballads, designed to be sung, would have reached a very large audience and were able to be enjoyed by even the poorest members of society or those who were illiterate. They were thus a powerful vehicle for promulgating ideas about the workhouse master, especially amongst the lower classes of society. In 1856, the whipping and beating of pauper girls by the master of Marylebone workhouse was reported in the newspapers and taken up as the subject of the ballad ‘The Woman Flogger’s Lament of Marylebone Workhouse’ (no date).⁸⁷ Written to be sung to the tune of ‘Oh dear what can the matter be’, the ballad supposedly relates the master’s regret at his brutal conduct towards the pauper women in his charge. The ballad opens with the lines:

Oh dear here’s a shocking disaster,
My name it is [Ryan] a poor workhouse master,
I have now got discharged and my sentence is
passed, sirs.
Because I went flogging the girls.
The two flogging porters and me are crushed
down sirs,
One porter is green and the other is brown,
sirs,
We would not have it happened for five hundred
pounds, sirs,
Flogging the dear little girls.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ For details of the case see, amongst others, ‘The Abominable Beating of Women in Marylebone Workhouse’, *Morning Chronicle*, 4 August 1856, p. [6] or ‘The Flogging in Marylebone Workhouse. – Official Investigation’, *Daily News*, 26 August 1856, p. 3.

⁸⁸ ‘The Women Flogger’s Lament of Marylebone Workhouse’, [no date], printed by Skinner, Westminster. Available online at *Bodleian Library Broadside Ballads*, University of Oxford: <http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/ballads/> [date accessed 29 November 2013].

The ballad identifies not only the workhouse in question, but also the disgraced officials: the lines of the ballad refer directly to Mr Ryan and his two porters, named Green and Brown.

A second broadside ballad, ‘The Model Workhouse Master!’, similarly draws explicitly upon a factual case reported in the newspapers. In 1862, an inmate of the Bethnal Green workhouse complained that she had been raped by the workhouse master, Mr Theobald Merrick, and had subsequently become pregnant.⁸⁹ Two verses from the ballad read:

With Miss S– S– he did begin,
And in the parlour shewed her in,
Something was done – between you and me,
I was outside so I could not see,

This Mr. M. is a very nice man,
He can do what no man can,
He swore if the girls did not obey,
He would get them all in a funny way.⁹⁰

Despite the gesture towards anonymity (the accused is ‘Mr. M.’ of the ‘B – I G – n’ workhouse), the ballad clearly identifies the master in question as Mr Merrick of the Bethnal Green workhouse.⁹¹ The wood engraving (fig. 6) above the text sets up the comic expectations of the ballad by depicting a clownish man in a sleeping hat bidding a shocked-looking woman welcome to his bedroom.⁹² Though they deal with the grim subjects of abuse and rape, the ballads transform the figure of the workhouse master into a subject of popular ridicule; in these texts, the threat of this figure is contained by the mockery directed at him.

As well as street literature, satirical representations of the workhouse master, which caricature him as a cruel and buffoonish figure, appeared in numerous magazines. Time and

⁸⁹ For more information, see ‘Alleged Profligacy in a Workhouse’, *Standard*, 11 October 1862, p. 7.

⁹⁰ ‘The Model Workhouse Master!’, printed by H. Disley, High Street, St. [Giles]. Available online at *Bodleian Library Broadside Ballads*, University of Oxford: <http://www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/ballads/> [date accessed 29 November 2013].

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² The woodcuts on broadside ballads were frequently reused and so did not necessarily accurately represent the content of the ballad.

again the workhouse master is pictured next to the workhouse door, refusing relief to destitute applicants. In *Cleave's Penny Gazette* (1843), a caricature of a workhouse master refusing admittance to a woman and her new-born infant is depicted beneath the title 'A Prayer for the Poor Mother' (fig. 7). In this image a policeman stands outside a workhouse door holding up a new-born baby for the fat, peering face of the workhouse master to inspect from through the bars. On the floor, with her face turned away from the reader, sits the poor mother. A section of the text below the image reads:

POLICEMAN. – Master, pray let the poor woman into your Workhouse; this child has just been born in the street, and they have nowhere to lay their miserable heads.

MASTER. – Ve are too full of them ere sort already, therefore I can't and shan't. Take 'em both somewhere else.⁹³

Though the policeman dominates the image, his power over the workhouse master is defunct. It seems that, in this instance, the workhouse master is immune to the authority of the police and the law of the land.⁹⁴ The image and text are positioned to the right of a very different scene, titled 'A Prayer for the Royal Mother' (fig. 8). In this image, an improbably obese clergyman reads a prayer for Queen Victoria who, a month earlier, had given birth to her third child. The text reads '[a]nd may it please *Bob* to grant her Majesty and her Royal Infant, every comfort and enjoyment the Nation can afford; and surround her with protection and assistance at every moment of need; and that she and her Royal Infant may feel none of the wants and pangs of the vulgar poor'.⁹⁵ The juxtaposed images draw attention to, and criticise, the disparity in 'worth' society attaches to the babies of the rich and those of the poor.

⁹³ 'A Prayer for the Poor Mother', *Cleave's Penny Gazette*, 13 May 1843, p. [1].

⁹⁴ The refusal to admit the pauper woman, even on the request of the police, recalls the news report 'Unfeeling Conduct of a London Workhouse Master', discussed previously.

⁹⁵ 'A Prayer for the Royal Mother', *Cleave's Penny Gazette*, 13 May 1843, p. [1].

In 'How the Poor are Served' (fig. 9; 1845) in the *Penny Satirist*, the workhouse master is pictured in the act of a much more violent refusal of relief.⁹⁶ In the image, the obese workhouse master physically kicks a ragged pauper man from the steps of the workhouse. The prostrate legs of another pauper figure can be seen lying on the ground where he has apparently been thrown. A text bubble above the master's head reads 'GO TO YR PARISH YER VAGABONDS'. In the second half of the image, the police are depicted moving the paupers on. As the poor man asks in the accompanying text below the images, '[w]hy don't you just manure the ground with our bodies at once, and get rid of the poor altogether?'⁹⁷ The inhumanity and corruptions of the workhouse system are here embodied in the figure of the corpulent workhouse master.

Workhouse masters also feature in nineteenth-century novels. Like the ballads and the caricatures, Charles Dickens' *Oliver Twist* (1837-39) and Fanny Trollope's *Jessie Phillips* (1842-43) operate within a satirical register and strip power away from the master by ridiculing him. Though the workhouse master in *Oliver Twist* is Dickens's most famous representation of a master, an earlier depiction of one is included in his sketch 'Our Parish' (1835), which was first published in the *Evening Chronicle* under the title *Sketches of London*:

[He] eyes you, as you pass his parlour-window, as if he wished you were a pauper, just to give you a specimen of his power. He is an admirable specimen of a small tyrant: morose, brutish, and ill-tempered; bullying to his inferiors, cringing to his superiors, and jealous of the influence and authority of the beadle.⁹⁸

In the representation of this officer, Dickens paints a portrait of a mercenary and power-obsessed social climber. Though the master's social position is 'a change for the better', he is envious of the authority wielded by others and, in particular, of the status of the parish

⁹⁶ This image is set against another scene under the same heading in which the poor are moved on by a policeman.

⁹⁷ 'How the Poor are Served', *Penny Satirist*, 22 February 1845, p. [1].

⁹⁸ [Charles Dickens] (writing as Boz), 'Our Parish', in *Dickens' Journalism: Sketches by Boz and other Early Papers 1833-39*, ed. Michael Slater (1836; London: Phoenix Giants, 1996), pp. 5-47 (p. 9).

beadle.⁹⁹ In contrast to the master's 'rusty black coat and threadbare velvet collar', the beadle is a 'lace-trimmed' figure who struts around in a 'state coat and cocked hat, with a large-headed staff for show in his left hand and a small cane for use in his right'.¹⁰⁰ The finery of the beadle emphasises the shabbiness of the workhouse master and his low social rank outside of the confines of the workhouse.

The beadle of 'Our Parish' can be read as a prototype for the infamous Mr Bumble, the pompous and egotistic beadle of *Oliver Twist*. Bumble is a cruel-hearted, obsequious man, who is ridiculous in his puffed-up pride and self importance.¹⁰¹ In comparison to Mr Bumble, the workhouse master, Mr Slout, is almost redundant in the narrative. The master's subservient status to the beadle is indicated by the 'cook's uniform' worn by him to serve the gruel, which is the antithesis of Bumble's grandiose attire.¹⁰² Mr Slout briefly features in the dining-hall scene, in which Oliver famously asks for more gruel; the text satirises Slout's reaction to this innocuous request: '[t]he master was a fat, healthy man; but he turned very pale. He gazed in stupefied astonishment on the small rebel for some seconds and then clung for support to the copper'.¹⁰³ The master's response to Oliver is a parody of the behaviour of the swooning Romantic heroine: he turns 'pale', speaks 'faintly' and 'shrieks' for the beadle, Dickens's real representative of workhouse authority.¹⁰⁴ Rather than a fleshed-out character, the master exists here only as a stock figure to facilitate Oliver's rebellion against the workhouse system. The master does not make another appearance in the text and is

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 9, p. 7. As Paul Schlicke has noted, the symbols of beadedom (cocked hat, coat and brass buttons), made the beadle an easy target for satire. Paul Schlicke, 'Bumble and the Poor Law Satire of *Oliver Twist*', *Dickensian*, 71 (1975), 149-156 (p. 149). Sally Ledger also discusses the representation of bealdes in contemporary culture in her analysis of anti-Poor Law literature. See Sally Ledger, *Dickens and the Popular Radical Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), pp. 79-92.

¹⁰¹ Schlicke suggests that Bumble's physicality is effaced by the symbols of his beadedom and that his 'uniform is the principal object of his vanity and the sole source of his power'. Schlicke, 'Bumble', p. 153. The *Oxford English Dictionary* traces the etymology of the word 'Bumbledom' to *Oliver Twist* and defines it as '[f]ussy official pomposity and stupidity, especially as displayed by the officers of petty corporations'. See *Oxford English Dictionary*. Available online at: <http://dictionary.oed.com> [date accessed 18 August 2011].

¹⁰² Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, ed. Kathleen Tillotson (1837; Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 12.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

mentioned again only in reference to his imminent demise. It appears that the shock of Oliver's dissent has dealt Slout a fatal blow.

Although the master appears inconsequential in Dickens's text, the moment of confrontation between Oliver and Mr Slout in chapter two remains one of the most enduring images of the nineteenth-century workhouse in the popular imagination.¹⁰⁵ George Cruikshank gives pictorial expression to the moment of Oliver's request for second helpings in 'Oliver asking for more' (fig. 10). In this etching, the master is satirised as a grotesque figure with bulging eyes and pointed nose, who stares down at Oliver in shock. The difference in size between the emaciated Oliver and the obese Slout suggests the master's filching of the paupers' rations. The privileging of this scene in the visual narratives of *Oliver Twist* suggests a divergence of priorities between text and image; as Michael Steig notes, Dickens's 'vision' lies 'not [in] the moment of Oliver asking for more, but [in] the violent reaction of the workhouse bureaucracy immediately following' and it is 'the illustrator, rather, who has fixed the moment of "asking for more" in the readers' imaginations'.¹⁰⁶

Like Cruikshank, J. Mahoney, the illustrator of the Household Edition of *Oliver Twist* (1872) also chose to privilege this dining-room scene by giving it visual expression (fig. 11).¹⁰⁷ Rather than appearing alongside the text of chapter two, in which the scene occurs, the image appears as the frontispiece to chapter one and is thus invested with even more significance. Cruikshank and Mahoney's interpretation of this scene are similar in some aspects. In both images, Oliver, holding a small bowl and an oversized spoon, is depicted appealing to the workhouse master, who stands by the soup copper, with one hand resting

¹⁰⁵ Juliet John points out that 'Oliver Twist's simple request for more food must be one of the most well-known of all literary quotations in the English language. Orphan Oliver's words, like his story, have assumed a cultural significance far greater than a writer of even Dickens's self-confidence could have foreseen.' See Juliet John, *Dickens and Mass Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 208.

¹⁰⁶ Michael Steig, 'George Cruikshank and the Grotesque: A Psychodynamic Approach', in *George Cruikshank: A Reevaluation*, ed. Robert L. Patten (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 189- 211 (p. 206).

¹⁰⁷ This edition of *Oliver Twist* contains 28 illustrations by J. Mahoney. See Charles Dickens, *The Adventures of Oliver Twist*, in *The Works of Charles Dickens: Household Edition* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1872).

proprietary upon it. The pauper boys pictured in the background of both images exhibit similar expressions of hunger: they lick spoons, fingers and bowls, and clutch their stomachs. Mahoney's workhouse master is as obese as Cruikshank's, but his hunched, almost animalistic posture gives him a more menacing appearance. Similarly, the white, effeminate-looking hands of Cruikshank's master contrast with the larger and more corporeal hands of Mahoney's master. The ladle which he holds in his hand is in opposition to Oliver's miserably small spoon and draws attention to the violence of Dickens's words: in the text, Slout beats Oliver with this ladle. The illustrations of the master add visual impact to the sketchy textual description and work with the words to construct the popular perception of this officer. While Cruikshank's caricaturing of the scene captures the dark humour of the text, Mahoney's more realistic rendering of the scene has a darker edge.

The superficial nature of the master's power in the text is most clearly demonstrated when Bumble relinquishes his beadlehood and becomes workhouse master.¹⁰⁸ Motivated by the promise of free board and coals, Bumble marries the workhouse matron (Mrs Corney) and takes over as master after Slout's death.¹⁰⁹ The stripping away of the beadle's uniform is equivalent to the stripping away of Bumble's authority and he is reduced to 'the lowest depth of the most snubbed hen-peckery'.¹¹⁰ His loss of authority is most clearly demonstrated when he strides into the workhouse washroom intending to admonish some gossiping paupers:

"Hem!" said Mr. Bumble, summoning up all his native dignity. "These women at least shall

¹⁰⁸ Schlicke makes a compelling argument for Dickens's beadle as symbolic of the wider abuses of the Poor Law system, but suggests that Dickens's attack upon the Poor Law is hindered by the fact that Bumble's cruelties remain even after he is stripped of beadlehood. See Schlicke, 'Bumble', pp. 154-155. However, it is perhaps possible to view Bumble's continued inhumanity as owing to his new Poor Law role which, after all, requires the same hardheartedness as that required by beadles: once Bumble has decided to take up the post of master, he straight away proceeds to 'the male paupers' ward, to abuse them a little; with the view of satisfying himself that he could fill the office of workhouse-master with needful acerbity'. Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, p. 211. Though stripped of the uniform of Beadle, Dickens's Bumble still remains a figurehead of Poor Law officialdom.

¹⁰⁹ Before proposing marriage, Bumble makes an inventory of Mrs Corney's abundant material possessions: '[h]e opened the closet, counted the tea-spoons, weighed the sugar-tongs, [and] closely inspected a silver milk-pot to ascertain that it was of genuine metal'. Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, p. 185. As Mrs Corney is employed independently to the master, and as the rate of pay for matrons was so low, her silverware is suggestive of corruption and embezzlement.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 288.

continue to respect the prerogative”.¹¹¹ When Bumble catches sight of his wife, however, the ‘fierce and angry manner’ with which he strides through the door gives way immediately to a ‘most humiliated and cowering air’.¹¹² Mrs Bumble ridicules her husband in front of the sniggering paupers and accuses him of ‘making everybody in the house, laugh, the moment your back is turned: and making yourself look like a fool every hour in the day’.¹¹³

Cruikshank gives visual expression to Bumble’s humiliation in the illustration ‘Mr Bumble degraded in the eyes of the paupers’ (fig. 12). The image pictures a cowering Bumble knocking over a table in his haste to back away from his wife, who brandishes a pan of soap suds and lashes out aggressively at him. The impression of movement in the picture conveys Bumble’s hurry to escape and draws attention to the power which his wife now wields over him. To the left of the scene, one pauper woman clutches her companion’s arm in glee and both titter delightedly at Bumble’s humiliation. The move from beadle to master in Dickens’s text led to the conflation of these roles in the nineteenth-century popular imagination; *Oliver Twist* made infamous the representation of workhouse officials as bumbling tyrants.¹¹⁴

As in *Oliver Twist*, the officials connected with the workhouse in Fanny Trollope’s *Jessie Phillips* are synonymous with the cruelty of the regime. The respectable Mrs Buckhurst, a resident of Deepbrook, laments that,

I wish [...] I had not seen old Simon Rose, with his grand-daughter, poor soul! and her three little ones, standing before that dreadful Richard Dempster, the governor, looking as if they thought that life and death depended on his will.¹¹⁵

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 287.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p. 288.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ The impact of Dickens’s Bumble on the representation of the Poor Law authorities is demonstrated by the abundance of references to this fictional character in workhouse representations throughout the century. In ‘Bumble Out Bumbled’, published in *Fun*, the short article reports how a workhouse master ordered a destitute former accountant to do ‘twice the ordinary amount of oakum-picking on the ground that “a clerk’s fingers are more nimble”’ and then tried to prosecute him when he could not meet his targets. ‘Bumble Out Bumbled’, *Fun*, 11 October 1882, p. 157.

¹¹⁵ Mrs Fanny Trollope, *Jessie Phillips: A Tale of the Present Day* (1843; Nonsuch Classics: Stroud, 2006), p. 35.

An illustration by John Leech (fig. 13) gives visual expression to Mrs Buckhurst's haunting memory. The image depicts the hunched figure of Simon Rose desperately pleading for relief with the master, Mr Dempster, who stands barring the door of the workhouse.¹¹⁶ Next to the old man is his downcast granddaughter cradling a baby, and two little ragged children huddled together by her skirts. The 'dreadful' Mr Dempster is depicted in the illustration as a fat, menacing figure, with a dog standing by his legs.¹¹⁷ The dog intimidates the applicants-for-relief and is described later in the narrative as a 'Cerberus'.¹¹⁸ This reference to the three-headed dog of Greek mythology who guards the river Styx (the boundary between life and death) draws a comparison between the underworld and the union workhouse. In this image, Leech adds the extra pictorial detail of a winged crow-like shape flying above the workhouse. A cultural symbol of death, the crow has sinister connotations and predicts the impending deaths of the impoverished applicants. As in Pugin's *Contrasts*, the steeple of the church is sketched hazily in the background and implies the severing of the workhouse from Christian morality.

At other moments in the text, the master and matron are again depicted blocking the doorways and gates of the workhouse. When Mrs Greenhill, an impoverished grandmother, is forced to request relief at the workhouse, she is greeted on approach by the sight of the Dempsters 'stationed at the door of the court-yard'.¹¹⁹ Positioned by the entrance, Mr and Mrs Dempster act as both official lookouts and visual deterrents. Later in the narrative, Mrs

¹¹⁶ Mr Bumble displays a similarly harsh attitude towards applicants for relief; as he points out to Mrs Corney, '[t]he great principle of out-of-door relief is, to give the paupers exactly what they don't want; and then they get tired of coming'. Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, p. 179.

¹¹⁷ An abridged and partially rewritten version of *Jessie Phillips* was serialised in *Reynolds's Miscellany* in 1857-58 in fourteen parts. Subtitled 'A Tale of the Union Workhouse' rather than 'A Tale of the Present Day', the narrative immediately declares itself to be a comment upon the new workhouse system. The illustration by Leech has been redrawn and acts as the frontispiece to the tale, drawing attention to the significance of the workhouse in the narrative. In this illustration, the master leans towards the paupers in an interrogative manner and the dog, which bares its teeth at a child, seems larger and more aggressive. See Mrs Fanny Trollope, 'Jessie Phillips, A Tale of the Union Workhouse', part 1, *Reynolds's Miscellany of Romance, General Literature, Science, and Art*, 10 October 1857, pp. 161-163 (frontispiece, p. 161).

¹¹⁸ Trollope, *Jessie Phillips*, p. 282.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

Dempster is given visual expression blocking the doorway of the women's ward (fig. 14). The illustration depicts Mrs Dempster's verbal attack in the text upon the grief-stricken Susan White when she pleads to see her injured husband, who is in the workhouse infirmary: the matron 'seemed inclined to return no answer at all [...] but just as she reached the door, she turned, and said, – "Listen to me, Mrs. New-come, and if you are a wise woman you will remember what I say. We must have no noisy maundering here. [...] [W]e've got our cage here as well as other folks. So don't aggravate me, that's all".'¹²⁰ Mrs Dempster, a robust figure in contrast to the pleading Susan and the drooping Jessie, is centralised in the image and dominates the scene. The matron's authority is signalled in the image by her finger, which she points threateningly towards Susan. Pictured with one hand on the door, with a black space visible beyond, the illustration suggests Mrs Dempster's power over the workhouse space; a bunch of keys hangs from her apron, signalling her position as both housekeeper and gaoler.

The master and matron's anxiety about their own low-social status is suggested by the reverence in which they hold the workhouse guardians and the spite they show to the paupers. The newly-destitute Mrs Greenhill, whom Mrs Dempster has always resented for being 'too proud by half', is at the receiving end of their malice when she arrives at the workhouse to apply for relief.¹²¹ Mr Dempster complains to her that 'it is something unaccountable and unheard of, to be sure, to see one bundle of rags after another coming up here, to bully and bother all the first and foremost gentlemen for miles and miles round'.¹²² When she looks as if she will collapse, Mr Dempster says that he should be 'proud and happy' to carry her in but that 'she have been used, you know, to ride about with my lady Duchess in a coach'.¹²³ The enjoyment that the master and matron take in Mrs Greenhill's fall is born out of jealousy for

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 333.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 120.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

her quiet dignity and her refined mannerisms, and for her opinion of Mrs Dempster as ‘rather too blunt, bluff and jovial in her manners to make a very desirable companion’.¹²⁴ That they once shared with her ‘equality of condition in their respective circumstances’ draws attention to the precarious nature of social standing and the indiscernible social divide between workhouse staff and their pauper charges.¹²⁵

The nebulous social position of the master and matron is also alluded to in Anne Thackeray-Ritchie’s novella *Jack the Giant Killer* (1867), in which the workhouse system is an allegory for the murderous giant faced by Jack in the folkloric tale. When the protagonist, Jack, takes up the post of workhouse chaplain, he denounces the cruelties of ‘a two-headed creature called Bulcox, otherwise termed the master and matron of the place’.¹²⁶ In the text, the matron ‘glance[s] admiringly at [...Jack’s...] neatly appointed dressing-table, the silver top to his shaving-gear, and the ivory brushes’, and the master comments that Jack ‘keeps very ‘igh company’.¹²⁷ Their reluctant admiration of Jack’s material possessions and social circle signals their inferior social position; like Mr and Mrs Dempster, this couple are not too far removed from the impoverished paupers they tyrannise.

The master and matron in *Jessie Phillips* and *Jack the Giant Killer* lust after a higher social position, a longing that seems to have been common to many real-life workhouse officers. Though newspaper reports show that masters frequently abused their power over the paupers, the most common accusation against matrons was regarding their pretensions to a higher social status.¹²⁸ The Poor Law manual for workhouse masters and matrons stipulates that the matron should dress according to her social role, pointing out that she should ‘be

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

¹²⁶ Anne Thackeray-Ritchie, *Jack the Giant Killer* (1867; Boston: Loring, 1868) p. 23.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 23, 25. Mr and Mrs Bulcox’s admiration of Jack’s possessions makes Mrs Corney’s acquisitions seem all the more suspicious.

¹²⁸ Longmate points out that the ‘besetting fault’ of matrons was ‘perhaps *folie de grandeur*’ and notes that ‘[o]ne of the earliest workhouse visitors was very scathing about the “first lady” of one South London workhouse, whom she discovered one afternoon in the 1860s “playing the piano in her smart sitting room”’. See Longmate, *The Workhouse*, p. 105.

plainly but neatly dressed, and should avoid all finery unsuitable to her position'.¹²⁹ The conceited self-importance of both a matron and a master is nowhere more apparent than in the narrative *An Old Inmate: Her Story as Told by Herself: Addressed and Dedicated to the Ratepayers of London* (1894). Told through the framing narrative of a lady visitor, the text claims to relate the story, as heard by the visitor-narrator, of an elderly woman (Sarah) left with no option but to go into the workhouse and of her experiences therein. On her first night in the workhouse, Sarah looks for someone to direct her to her allocated bed:

And presently I did see some one – a very fine lady she looked in the dim light, dressed in a trailing black silk dress, with a blue cloak round her shoulders. Thinking that she was one of the ladies that comes to read in such places, I stopped her and asked the way. She didn't so much as speak. She looked me up and down with a sort of contempt [...]. How some of them laughed at me when I told them afterwards! It was the matron I had spoken to and she was dressed for dinner. The master, whose quarters is beautifully furnished, with velvet curtains over the doors, and pianos, and soft carpets and curtains, was having friends that night. I heard the piano going long after I went to bed.¹³⁰

The matron here enacts the role of lady of the manor house, performing the social rituals of dressing for dinner and entertaining friends. Rather than a paid employee of the workhouse, the matron thinks of the building as her own private house. That the matron is mistaken for a lady visitor, one of whom is retelling the pauper's story, draws attention to her transgression of her social position. The master and matron neglect their proper duties in order to play out this fantasy of upper-class life and, as one of the other inmates is said to have pointed out to Sarah: '[t]hough the rules is strict as you please for us poor inmates, they're as lax as you please for the officials. The master was having a party. Was it to be expected that him and his wife should leave their guests and go round amongst us?'¹³¹ The representation of these officials, and the luxuries enjoyed by them, are a far cry from the shabbier descriptions of the master and matron in earlier texts. The finery of the matron and her children, who live with

¹²⁹ Lumley, *Master and Matron of the Workhouse*, p. x.

¹³⁰ [Charlotte Despard?], *An Old Inmate: Her Story as Told by Herself: Addressed and Dedicated to the Ratepayers of London* (London: George Allen, 1894), p. 40.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

her, becomes a form of absurd social spectacle; Sarah relates how the clothing and mannerisms of the matron would make attending chapel an entertaining outing; as she tells the visitor, ‘the matron and her children would come, dressed out like a queen and princes and princesses – it was worth going to church I used to say to see her sweep down the aisle in her silk dress’.¹³² The pauper’s description functions here as an explicit criticism of the matron’s social fantasies.

The master too is described as having pretensions to a higher social status. When the pauper first sees him he is ‘got up like a fine gentleman, with a shooting-coat and smoking-cap, such as I had seen the captain I worked for wear in the morning, smoking a cigar, and with a very lordly air’.¹³³ The master’s rule in the workhouse is despotic and he resents any outside influence. On one occasion, a group of local ladies who read in the workhouse offer to treat the inmates to tea and

[t]here was a great hubbub and talk about it, and, for a day or two, the place was quite lively. Then some one heard that the master didn’t like it; that the ladies who were getting it up interfered with the management, and that, though he couldn’t prevent it (the guardians being favourable), any one that went would be marked and get into trouble sure enough, sooner or later.¹³⁴

Given the master’s social fantasies, it seems that his objection to the ladies stems from his jealousy of their higher social status, rather than from any genuine interference with the management of the workhouse. Their presence in the workhouse and relationship with the paupers disrupts the master and matron’s enactment of lord and lady of the manner.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 56. Lady Visitors are discussed in the next chapter.

The Master as Victim

Although the dominant representation of the master is that of a tyrannous figure who abuses his authority, in reality, masters like the paupers, were trapped in a regime dictated by the guardians and the Poor Law authorities.¹³⁵ At the same time as ensuring the smooth running of the house, masters had to attend regular board meetings and were subjected to inspections from the guardians and Assistant Commissioners.¹³⁶ The Bishop of London's address at the Second Annual Meeting of the Workhouse Visiting Society made reference to the difficulties facing both guardians and masters. As he pointed out, '[t]he duties of the master of a Workhouse are [...] very difficult. He sees so much of the worst side of human nature, and he has to carry out the orders of a rigid system'.¹³⁷ The article 'Workhouse Inspection' (1868) in the *English Woman's Review* also draws attention to the difficulties attached to the role of master. This text implicitly constructs the master and matron as individuals whose inclinations towards natural acts of human kindness are at odds with the 'rigid' system they work within. The article describes how, in one workhouse, the master used to let the aged men smoke, but that when an inspector called unannounced all the pipes had to be quickly hidden so that 'the crime of shewing kindness to aged paupers escaped discovery'.¹³⁸ The text comments that, if the truth had been detected, 'this great offence, though costing the union absolutely nothing, might have been heavily visited on the master'.¹³⁹ In this way, the text draws attention to the master as himself at the mercy of the workhouse system. The

¹³⁵ Crowther notes that '[r]esidential institutions impose a routine on staff as well as inmates'. Crowther, *The Workhouse System*, p. 114.

¹³⁶ Even Mr Brokenshire, the celebrated governor of Chorlton union workhouse, who supposedly 'carries out the guardians' will/ And all their wishes to fulfil', seems to have had a rocky relationship with the board of guardians who employed him ('A Model Workhouse Master'). Apparently, some of the guardians did not appreciate the master's sense of humour and, at one meeting, Brokenshire's report was met with accusations of 'facetiousness' and 'irreverence'. See 'A Waggish Workhouse Master', *City Jackdaw*, 5 May 1876, p. 225.

¹³⁷ 'Second Annual Meeting of the Society', *Journal of the Workhouse Visiting Society*, VII (1860), 197-209 (p. 206).

¹³⁸ 'Workhouse Inspection', *English Woman's Review*, 1 January 1868, pp. [327]-336 (p. 328).

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

inhumanity of the inspecting authorities is represented in a further anecdote in the article, which describes how, in another union workhouse, the matron permitted elderly women to drink tea but that ‘[t]his breach of rules was unfortunately discovered, and the surreptitious tea-pots broken, though whether by the inspector or the guardians we cannot undertake to say’.¹⁴⁰ The pathos of the broken tea pots suggests the cruelty of the inspectors and constructs the in-house officials as themselves inmates of the house, governed, just like the paupers, by the Poor Law system.

Many real masters also seem to have had anxieties about the correct way to enforce discipline and their ability to manage their fractious pauper charges. Riots, mutinies and assaults in the workhouse all subverted the master’s rule and stripped authority away from him. In particular, *The Diary of Benjamin Woodcock, Master of the Barnet Union Workhouse, 1836-1838* reveals the day-to-day struggles of the workhouse master to discipline paupers, oversee staff, and implement the guardians’ orders. The daily entries are short, but one pauper is referred to time and again throughout the diary: Laura Cooper’s refractory behaviour, mentioned in the very first journal entry, seems to have posed a constant threat to Woodcock’s authority. On 19th October 1836, Woodcock writes that ‘Laura Cooper was Again very refractory this Morning I was about to use the Cane, but she promised to be A good Girl in future’.¹⁴¹ Woodcock’s threat of corporal punishment is effective in disciplining Laura into good behaviour. In response to this entry, however, is a comment written by the guardians in the margins of the text, which reads ‘[n]o cane to be used in the case of females’.¹⁴² Stripped of the authority to threaten Laura with corporal punishment, the master

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ Diary entry for 19 October 1836, [Benjamin Woodcock], *The Diary of Benjamin Woodcock, Master of the Barnet Union Workhouse, 1836-1838*, ed. Gillian Gear (Rickmansworth: Hertfordshire Record Society, 2008), p. 15.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

is left at a loss as to how to deal with refractory inmates.¹⁴³ When Laura verbally and physically abuses the other paupers, the master appeals directly to the guardians for advice on how to enforce his authority: '[i]n the event of any further Complaint of this sort, from the inmates please to say how I am to punish her'.¹⁴⁴ Whatever the guardians' response, it appears to have had little effect in helping Woodcock manage this refractory pauper; on 19th April 1838, he laments that 'Laura Cooper has behaved so Disorderly this last week, we don't know what to do with her'.¹⁴⁵ The master's daily struggle to cope with the paupers in his care throws light on the difficulties of imposing discipline on such a diverse range of people.

Mr Woodcock appears to be far from the stereotype of the abusive master popularised by Dickens or Trollope. Nevertheless, his diary entries suggest his concern about how he is perceived by the public: on 17th July 1837, Woodcock reports overhearing a female inmate complaining to a footman making a delivery that she was not 'well used'.¹⁴⁶ The master's indignation (and perhaps anxiety that this might reach the footman's employers) is apparent in his comment that '[w]e are not aware of giving her an Angry Word therefore it would be some satisfaction If the board will be pleased to call upon her for an explanation'.¹⁴⁷ Concerned that idle gossip might affect his social standing in the community, Woodcock calls upon the guardians to investigate the matter and uphold his public image. Many of the diary entries draw attention to Woodcock's reliance upon the guardians to endorse his power in the workhouse; he constantly asks for their opinion on matters, suggesting the reverence in which he holds them.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴³ Permitted punishments for offences included changes in diet and incarceration. In one entry, Woodcock writes how he had to resort to threatening Laura Cooper with the straightjacket when she threatened to break all the windows of the refractory ward: '[t]he fear of the straight waistcoat, I believe was the thing which prevented her doing Mischief'. *Ibid.*, 11 February 1837, p. 43.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 24 October 1836, p. 17.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 19 April 1838, p. 135.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 17 July 1837, p. 78.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁸ Gillian Gear suggests that Woodcock was 'very much in awe of the guardians, to whom he appealed for advice and approval'. See Gillian Gear, 'Introduction' to *Diary of Benjamin Woodcock*, pp. vii-xli (p. xxxviii).

The diary reveals that it was not just the paupers who posed a challenge to Woodcock's authority: his entries indicate that he was also burdened by a porter with ideas above his station. In the journal, Woodcock reports that, on one occasion, the porter 'abused me & the matron shamefully [...] because the Plate in which I sent his dinner did not suit him' and complains that the porter has claimed to visitors that 'he had as much authority as the master'.¹⁴⁹ His comments about the porter demonstrate a concern that this member of staff might undermine his authority in the workhouse and affect how he is regarded by the paupers: he points out to the guardians that the behaviour of this man 'may tend to Lessen that feeling of due respect and Submission among the inmates, so Necessary to be upheld to Maintain proper order and Discipline'.¹⁵⁰ Forced to deal with refractory inmates and disorderly porters on a day-to-day basis, Woodcock appears to have struggled to assert his own authority; the diary is fraught with anxieties about the limits of the workhouse master's power.

In several workhouses, the master's inability to govern disorderly paupers resulted in full-blown riots. Attacks upon the master were not uncommon and one particularly violent assault was that executed upon the master (Mr Sutton) of St Luke's workhouse by eleven male paupers in December 1844. *Lloyd's Weekly London Newspaper* describes how Mr Sutton appeared in court to testify against his assailants with his 'eyes [...] blackened, and face much discoloured and swollen'.¹⁵¹ The paper reports that the accused paupers became rowdy after their Christmas dinner and that the master had to 'request them to preserve more order, which he did in the kindest way'.¹⁵² The master's attempt to discipline the paupers failed miserably and, after threatening to call the police if the inmates did not go to bed, he was assaulted by a pauper who 'struck him a violent blow in the face, observing, "I'll kill the

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 26 July 1837, p. 81.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 24 July 1837, p. 80.

¹⁵¹ 'Riot in a Workhouse', *Lloyd's Weekly London Newspaper*, 29 December 1844, p. 8.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

— .”¹⁵³ Mr Sutton was then set upon by the other paupers, who ‘surrounded [...him...], knocked him down, and beat him in the most savage manner’.¹⁵⁴ Mr. Sutton’s ‘kindly’ attempts to enforce order were clearly unsuccessful and he instead became a victim of their violence. Though workhouse masters were expected to govern the paupers, this vicious attack signals the precarious nature of the master’s authority and the potential for the hierarchy of power to be subverted.

The undermining of the workhouse master’s authority is also apparent in the report ‘Assault by a Pauper’ (1882), published in the *Illustrated Police News*, about a female pauper’s attack on the master of the St George’s union workhouse. When the pauper behaved aggressively towards the task mistress, ‘Mr Cole, the master, was fetched, and on threatening her with punishment, she used the most shocking language, endeavoured to bite him, and made several kicks at him’.¹⁵⁵ Far from a figure of authority, in this news report the master is a victimised individual at the mercy of a pauper woman. The image on the front cover of the *Illustrated Police News* depicts this attack on Mr Cole (fig. 15). The pauper is centralised in the picture, swinging her fist towards the master, with her skirts swirling around her kicking leg. By contrast to the strength emanating from the pauper dominating the scene, Cole is visualised as a weak-looking, cowering figure, leaning away from the pauper and holding up his arm in effeminate fright. Though the respectable-looking master is not represented as a Bumble-type figure, the sense of movement in the image recalls the arrangement of the master and matron in ‘Mr Bumble degraded in the eyes of the paupers’, which also depicts a cowering and humiliated master at the mercy of an aggressive female. The *Illustrated Police News* reports Cole’s complaint that ‘he had done all in his power, by conversation and

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ ‘Assault by a Pauper’, *Illustrated Police News*, 7 October 1882, pp. [1]-2 (p. 2).

persuasion, to try and reform this woman, but she was quite incorrigible'.¹⁵⁶ Like Mr Sutton, the master's attempts to reform this refractory inmate are limited to 'conversation' and he relies upon the legal authorities to enforce order. Cole's authority is eroded along with the inversion of the class and gender boundaries that the pauper flouts in her attack upon the workhouse master.

These factual cases of workhouse riots generate sympathy for the workhouse master, who had to deal with troublesome behaviour on a daily basis. Despite the victim status of the master, however, the representation of this figure in some of these news reports cannot be detached from the ridicule associated with workhouse officials. The 'Police' (1842) report in the *Illustrated London News* about three women accused of rioting in St Georges-in-the-East workhouse positions the reader on the side of the workhouse officials; the *Illustrated London News* depicts the female rioters as violent and 'improper' and reports that the women were accused of 'abus[ing] [...the matron...] in the most shameful manner', 'assail[ing] [the beadle] in the most violent manner' and smashing windows in the master's office.¹⁵⁷ Any sympathy for the long-suffering workhouse officials is disrupted, however, by the accompanying wood engraving depicting this riot (fig. 16), which instead ridicules these figures of authority. A carnivalesque sense of disorder is created in the engraving by the cups and plates which fly through the air and the legs which stick comically up from an overturned bench. The viewer's eye is drawn to the centralised figure of an energetic pauper woman, who is depicted grabbing the neck of the portly beadle in a one-handed grasp. The beadle's face is comically blown up and he is stripped of his symbols of power: his staff lies discarded

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.* The article reports that, in court, the woman 'gave a long recital of alleged wrong, the substance being that she, with other able-bodied paupers had "black beetle soup," "poisonous food," and water gruel'. The pauper thus played upon popular caricatures of the master in an attempt to cast herself as a victim of the master's tyranny. *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ 'Police', *Illustrated London News*, 26 November 1842, pp. 462-463 (p. 463). To add insult to injury, the article reports that the master learnt during the court case that a 'regular tumult' had broken out in the workhouse during his absence and yet more windows broken. When the women were sentenced they were far from remorseful and, upon being ordered to pay the damages for the windows, or imprisonment in lieu of that, they 'instantly commenced a volley of abuse against Overton [the beadle] and Mr. and Mrs. King [the master and matron]'. *Ibid.*

on the floor and a pauper waves his cocked hat in the air. To the right of the image, the matron and her helper throw up their arms in terror and frantically try to escape the mob. The laughing faces of some of the paupers ameliorate the reader's feelings towards the rioting women and make him or her complicit in the ridicule of the beadle and the matron. By caricaturing the officials and poking fun at them, the image subverts the seriousness of the text and adds humour to the news report. The image plays upon the popular representations of the beadle and seems to be a covert endorsement of the paupers' revolt.

That the role of master and matron did become more elevated later in the century is suggested by *Knight's Guide to the Arrangement and Construction of Workhouse Buildings* (1889). The guide points out that

the views of the public have undergone a gradual change in regard to the accommodation of the local governing bodies and their officers by which, as their duties have increased, the arrangements and accommodation necessary for the discharge of these duties have been dealt with in a more liberal manner – sometimes amounting almost to lavishness.¹⁵⁸

Though the role of the workhouse master became more professionalised and applicants were required to have relevant experience, contemporary newspaper accounts show that masters still struggled to shake off the ridicule attached to their position.¹⁵⁹ The subversion of the master's power by the media is overt in the case of the workhouse 'guy'. In November 1887, a pauper from St Luke's workhouse was charged before the Westminster Police Court with refractory conduct and insubordination. The inmate had been caught by the labour master pinning a stuffed effigy, designed to have the likeness of the workhouse master, Mr Wright, to a stack of wood near Wright's quarters. The news article 'A Guy in a Workhouse' (1887),

¹⁵⁸ *Knight's Guide to the Arrangement and Construction of Workhouse Buildings, with Notes and Diagrams of the Requirements and Recommendations of the Local Government Board, In regard to the Erection of the Poor Law Institutions* (London: Knight & co., 1889), p. 2.

¹⁵⁹ Crowther points out that '[n]othing reveals the changing function of the workhouse more clearly than the growth of a professional staff within it'. However, she also notes that '[t]he indoor officers were not entirely able to shed the brutal nineteenth century image' and that, even in the later years of the Poor Law system, 'the relatively low pay did not attract very educated men'. See Crowther, *The Workhouse System*, pp. 135, 148-149.

published in the *Birmingham Daily Post*, is subtitled ‘An Amusing Case’ and reports the labour master’s discovery of the ‘plot to bring the master into contempt and ridicule’.¹⁶⁰ In his deposition, paraphrased in the paper, the labour master asserted that the pauper ‘excited the other inmates to rebellion [...and...] had actually complained both of the sufficiency and quality of the food in the dining hall’.¹⁶¹ The pauper’s complaints about the food unwittingly invoke the rebellious request of Oliver Twist and, by implication, align the workhouse master with the caricatures of Dickens’s Slout. Unlike the rest of the court, the labour master and the workhouse master failed to see anything funny about the guy. As the paper reports, the master ‘made his way to the witness box, and told Mr Partrid[ge] that he did not consider this a joke. (Laughter.) This was really not a laughing matter. (Laughter.)’¹⁶² The master’s insistence that this was a serious case of insubordination, and that the pauper was the ‘audacious [*sic*] leader of a gang of malcontents’ provoked great mirth from the gallery and draws attention to the master’s insecurity about his own authority over the paupers.¹⁶³ The master’s humiliation was complete when even the magistrate, Mr Partridge, poked fun at his expense: he assured the master that ‘[p]ublic characters like you don’t mind a little ridicule. It is the penalty of greatness. (Roars of Laughter)’.¹⁶⁴ The master’s intention to hold this pauper up for public and legal condemnation backfired and he himself was lampooned as a figure of ridicule.

The guardians were sensitive to the mockery provoked by the case and were clearly concerned that they too would become the targets of ridicule. In the report of the guardians’ meeting, published in the article ‘The Guy at Chelsea Workhouse’ (1887), in the *York Herald*, their review of the refractory pauper is of secondary importance to their discussion about the master’s handling of the case. As the *York Herald* reports, one guardian proposed

¹⁶⁰ ‘A Guy in a Workhouse’, *Birmingham Daily Post*, 7 November 1887, p. 6.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

the amendment that ‘in all future cases of a similar description the Master be advised to use a little more common-sense’.¹⁶⁵ This motion was supported by another guardian, Mr Doel, who ‘lamented that the Master had made them the laughing-stock not only of all the papers, but of all London’.¹⁶⁶ The anxiety that they should be ‘laughing-stock[s]’ draws attention to the guardians’ awareness of their public image and sensitivity to their representation in the popular press.¹⁶⁷ Unfortunately for Mr Doel, the guy made the St Luke’s workhouse the ‘laughing-stock’ of the country, rather than just of London: the story of the guy became national news.¹⁶⁸ Despite the misgivings of two guardians, *Lloyd’s Weekly Newspaper* reports that ‘a vote of confidence in the master’, proposed by a guardian, was endorsed by the rest of the board.¹⁶⁹ The guardians’ vote was intended to quell any more dissent in the workhouse; as the guardian who proposed the vote noted, ‘the papers were read in the workhouse, and the paupers would see by their vote that the guardians upheld the master’s authority’.¹⁷⁰ The attempt to use the newspapers as a tool to enforce the master’s authority was unsuccessful: as the thinly veiled satire of the *Birmingham Daily Post* reveals, these newspapers played a simultaneous role in the insubordination of the master.

As well as being mocked in the papers, the case also provided rich material for satirical periodicals. By contrast to the implicit ridicule of the master in the newspapers, these publications are overt in their mockery of this workhouse official. ‘The Conspirators’–

¹⁶⁵ ‘The Guy at Chelsea Workhouse’, *York Herald*, 19 November 1887, p. 3.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ In nineteenth-century culture, the representation of the workhouse guardians is hardly more flattering than that of the master. They are characterised in *Oliver Twist* and *Jessie Phillips* as mercenary and unsympathetic men who are more interested in their own affairs than those of the paupers seeking relief. Like the workhouse master, the guardians provided a rich source of satire; the article ‘A Poor Law Guardian Poisoned’ in *Cleave’s Penny Gazette* includes a caricature of an obese workhouse guardian (Mr. Stint’em) being attended by the medical officer after accidentally swallowing some of the workhouse soup. The doctor informs Mr Stint’em that ‘the Decoction of Leather Aprons, Old Shoes, and stale Kitchen Stuff, is to be dreaded upon a person who lives high’. ‘A Poor Law Guardian Poisoned’, *Cleave’s Penny Gazette of Variety and Amusement*, 1 May 1841, p. 1.

¹⁶⁸ Not all newspapers found the case of the workhouse guy amusing. A brief overview of the case in *Freeman’s Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser* reports that ‘to add injury to insult, when the criminal who was caught red-handed was brought before the magistrate, the latter actually almost laughed the case out of court’. ‘London Correspondence’, *Freeman’s Journal and Daily Commercial Advertiser*, 7 November 1887, p. 6.

¹⁶⁹ ‘The Guy in a Workhouse’, *Lloyd’s Weekly Newspaper*, 20 November 1887, p. [1].

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

Chorus: A Wail from the Workhouse' (1887), published in *Funny Folks*, includes a satirical poem and a series of five cartoons representing the events which culminated in the pauper's arrest (fig. 17). In the final picture, the buffoonish master is depicted staring in dismay and bewilderment at his life-size effigy. The reduction of the workhouse master to a caricature in a cartoon strip is representative of a total subversion of the master's authority. *Fun* and *Punch* both draw upon the stock figure of Mr Bumble in their reporting of the case, suggesting the conflation of Bumble with all workhouse authority figures in the popular imagination. 'The Workhouse Guy (Ballad by Mr Bumble)' (1887), published in *Punch*, is a satirical poem written from the perspective of Bumble which pokes fun at the exchange between Mr Wright and Mr Partridge. In *Fun* the case is used as material for a poem and illustration: the image 'Guy Fawkes in the Workhouse' (fig. 18; 1887) is positioned above the caption, 'Mr. Bumble – "[...] when it comes to a caricaturing of the constituted authorities of a wukus, the world's a-comin' to a hend"'.¹⁷¹ The picture depicts a fat Mr Bumble, with his cocked hat flying off his head in shock, as he stares at a guy which is dressed up as a beadle and to which is pinned the ironic sign 'Bumble the Great'. The pointed hat on the guy's head resembles more that of a Dunce's cap, drawing attention to the manipulation of the symbols of Bumble's office for satirical effect. By caricaturing the master, the victim of the pauper prankster, these representations endorse the oppressive stereotype of the pompous master and further undermine the authority of these officials.

The reciprocal relationship between factual and fictional accounts consolidated the popular representation of the master. The 'factual' accounts in newspapers provided material or

¹⁷¹ 'Guy Fawkes in the Workhouse', *Fun*, 16 November 1887, p. 205.

inspiration for satirical attacks upon the master, which, in turn, influenced the representation of this figure in the newspapers and so provided yet more fodder for the caricaturists. The various representations of the master explored in this chapter draw attention to the problems of authority and power that converge in the figure of the workhouse master, the public face of the New Poor Law. While sensational accounts of cruelty criminalised the workhouse master as a fearsome tyrant who abused his authority, satirical narratives simultaneously eroded the master's influence and contained his threatening associations by caricaturing him as a bumbling official. Although workhouse masters are remembered as being at the centre of a social institution, the narratives explored in this chapter suggest that the workhouse master lived on the fringes of society, never fully accepted into the ranks of the respectable middle classes and governed by the regulations of the institution in which he lived and worked. *Oliver Twist* demonstrates the total collapse of the master's authority when, in the final pages of the novel, Bumble becomes a pauper inmate in the workhouse: Mr and Mrs Bumble, 'deprived of their situations, were gradually reduced to great indigence and misery, and finally became paupers in the very same workhouse in which they had once lorded it over others'.¹⁷² By transforming the inspector into the inspected, *Oliver Twist* avenges the tyrannies of Bumble and draws attention to the narrow gulf separating masters and their paupers. Together, these narratives construct an enduring representation of a type of workhouse master that was impossible to shake off and that persists to the present day.

¹⁷² Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, p. 438.

Chapter Three

Visiting the Workhouse

To the poorest members of society, the union workhouses were symbols of imprisonment, semi-starvation and penal separation. For those who did not live in the shadow of poverty, however, the workhouse held a very different set of meanings. During the nineteenth century, there emerged a growing interest in the condition of the poor, and the courts and alleys of impoverished neighbourhoods became the destination of both voyeuristic sightseers and altruistic well-wishers, most of whom used serious social reasons to justify their cross-class forays.¹ For many women in landowning families, visiting the poor was regarded as a duty of their privileged social position and a means to maintain contact with, and control over, the local poor.² In the towns and cities, district visitors, typically women of the upper-middle classes, provided moral and religious guidance to the poor in their own homes, as well as practical or financial support.³

The experiences of women undertaking this work are described in articles and advice manuals, which together form a genre of visiting literature through which to interpret the

¹ Seth Koven uses the term ‘slumming’ to describe these middle-class explorations. He defines it as ‘some sort of “descent”, across urban spatial and class, gender and sexual boundaries’ and explains that ‘[b]ecause the desire to go slumming was bound up in the need to disavow it, [...] men and women [...] used any word except slumming – charity, sociological research, Christian rescue, social work, investigative journalism – to explain why *they* had entered the slums’. See Seth Koven, *Slumming: Sexual and Social Politics in Victorian London* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 9. Koven’s analysis of nineteenth-century ‘slumming’, links expeditions amongst the poor to sexual transgression.

² Jessica Gerard writes that, ‘[i]n their role as Lady Bountiful, women of the nineteenth-century gentry and aristocracy reinforced the landed classes’ rule over the rural poor, implementing paternalism and enforcing deference. The women were normally responsible for visiting and helping the needy. They made the personal contacts so crucial for maintaining the system of patriarchal control and deference’. See Jessica Gerard, ‘Lady Bountiful: Women of the Landed Classes and Rural Philanthropy’, *Victorian Studies*, 30:2 (1987), 183-210 (p. 183-184).

³ For more information on district visiting, see Martin Hewitt, ‘District Visiting and the Constitution of Domestic Space in the Mid-Nineteenth Century’, in *Domestic Space: Reading the Nineteenth-Century Interior*, eds. Inga Bryden and Janet Floyd (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1999), pp. 121-141. For information about female visitors in particular see, amongst others, Dorice Williams Elliot, *The Angel out of the House: Philanthropy and Gender in Nineteenth-Century England* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2002), Anne Summers, ‘A Home from Home – Women’s Philanthropic Work in the Nineteenth Century’, in *Fit Work for Women*, ed. Sandra Burman (London: Croom Helm, 1979), pp. 33-63 and Ellen Ross, *Slum Travelers: Ladies and London Poverty, 1860-1920* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2007).

agenda of middle-class philanthropists. While, for many women, visiting the poor was a moral vocation, other members of the middle classes were drawn to slum life simply for the excitement of ogling poverty. The slum sensation was fuelled by texts such as Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851), Blanchard Jerrold and Gustave Doré's *London: A Pilgrimage* (1872) and George R. Sims's *How the Poor Live* (1883), which document the lives and dwellings of Victorian society's poorest members.⁴ The most dramatic exploration of indigence was perhaps 'A Night in a Workhouse' (1866).⁵ Desiring a first-hand experience of homelessness, the middle-class James Greenwood had disguised himself as a 'sly and ruffianly figure' and spent the night amongst real casuals in the vagrants' ward of Lambeth workhouse.⁶ The description of this visit is self-consciously sensational: in the concluding lines of the first instalment Greenwood claims that 'I am telling a story which cannot all be told – some parts of it are far too shocking'.⁷ The sensations offered by 'A Night in a Workhouse' generated mass interest in what happened behind the closed doors of the workhouses and played a part in bringing the institution into the public eye.

By contrast to the slums and the casual ward 'tourist sites', the actual workhouse building remained closed to the interference and curiosity of sensation seekers and altruists alike.⁸ Although district visiting was an accepted practice that was generally thought to have a beneficial influence on the poor, it was only with great difficulty extended to the poor in the union workhouses. These institutions, which housed thousands of paupers, remained almost entirely closed to visitors until the mid-nineteenth century. Attempts by well-meaning

⁴ The otherness of poverty is perhaps represented most famously in Doré's illustrations for *London: A Pilgrimage*. In the chapter on Whitechapel, Doré depicts figures queuing for admittance to a casual ward and men washing and being read to inside a Refuge. The dark images and dim gaslight illuminating the shadowy figures inside the shelter suggests Doré's Gothicised vision of the poor. See Blanchard Jerrold and Gustave Doré, *London: A Pilgrimage* (1872; London: Anthem Press, 2006), pp. 166-169.

⁵ The texts discussed in this chapter do not include those by casual ward visitors, as I have explored examples of these in chapter one.

⁶ [James Greenwood], 'A Night in a Workhouse', *Pall Mall Gazette*, 12 January 1866, pp. 9-10 (p. 10).

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Koven's term to describe the popularity of the slums. See Koven, *Slumming*, p. 1.

members of the middle classes to comfort and read to the paupers were usually rejected by the boards of guardians, although it was left to the discretion of individual unions to decide their own policies on visitors.⁹ Despite the difficulties in gaining access, however, a few dedicated individuals persevered with their efforts to become visitors to the paupers and, in 1858 the Workhouse Visiting Society was formed.¹⁰

The proliferation of journalism, fiction and illustrations featuring workhouse visitors, which appeared in periodicals and newspapers from the mid-nineteenth century, all provide an insight into how the middle classes interpreted the workhouses. This chapter is divided into three sections that explore different strands of workhouse visiting literature.¹¹ In the first section I analyse accounts of investigative journalism. These voyeuristically-intrusive texts depict visitors traversing pauper space, peering into nooks and crannies, and conversing with inmates, in an attempt to penetrate the secrets of the workhouse. Asserting the importance of experiencing the workhouse for themselves, the visitors in these texts are motivated by political debate about the workhouses, as well as a thrill-seeking desire to witness pauperism first hand. In the second section I focus upon the accounts of, and about, lady visitors, who visited the paupers in order to comfort them in their misery. In these accounts I consider the equivocal representation of the workhouse as both a home and an institution. From the charitable intentions of lady visitors, I move on to discuss the representations of workhouse philanthropy that were common in the nineteenth century. The depiction of visitors in these texts promulgates a charitable message to the bourgeois reader and enables them to feel vicariously part of the charity represented. In all of these narratives, visitors project their

⁹ As Summers notes, ‘it seems that neither before nor after the 1834 Act were women visitors officially barred from workhouses [...]; their admittance was entirely at the discretion of the all-male Board of Guardians of each individual Poor Law Union’. See Summers, ‘A Home from Home’, p. 62, n. 30.

¹⁰ The year of the formation of the society sometimes differs between accounts. For a contemporary nineteenth-century history of workhouse visiting and relevant publications, see [Louisa Twining?], ‘The Duty of Workhouse Visiting’, *Monthly Packet*, 1 March 1890, pp. 259-265.

¹¹ In the context of this chapter, I use the term ‘visitors’ to refer to middle and upper-class individuals who were not officials in the workhouse.

values onto the workhouse space and the representation of the institution becomes a stage for the social ideologies and political agendas of these members of the public.

Workhouse Tourism

The public curiosity about the workhouses is reflected in the proliferation of investigative journalism that explored the workhouse in the nineteenth century. By drawing attention to these closed buildings, these narratives were instrumental in opening up the workhouses to public scrutiny and dissemination. Though much was written about these institutions, very few readers of the middle-class periodicals and newspapers would ever see inside these buildings. James Irving Scott's short article 'The Workhouse' (1842), published in the *Odd Fellow*, draws attention to an observer's contemplation of one of these mysterious institutions. The author describes how, from a vantage point at a window in his house, he can look down into the neighbouring workhouse yard below. He explains that 'I frequently take my stand at the window, and gaze into the abode of the sons and daughters of poverty, and in this way have I spent many a profitable hour'.¹²

For this middle-class outsider, observing the rituals of workhouse life is an absorptive pastime and the paupers, upon whom he spies, are objects of fascination. Not content to merely record his observations, the narrator attempts to 'probe' the minds of the paupers, suggesting his attempt to understand the psychology of pauperism.¹³ By conjecturing that the paupers may have 'once filled a high, or at least a respectable station in life', the text narrows the social chasm between the reader and the inmates.¹⁴ The comment that '[it] would be no unprofitable task to draw a deep moral from the workhouse' suggests that readers should interpret the workhouse as an instructive lesson against improvidence and be aware of their

¹² James Irving Scott, 'The Workhouse', *Odd Fellow*, 2 July 1842, p. [1].

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

own precarious standing in society.¹⁵ A discourse of sight (‘gaze’, ‘looks’, ‘see’ and ‘eye’) infiltrates the short text, drawing attention to the significance of observation in constructing ideas of the workhouse.¹⁶ The narrator’s comment that ‘[as] I write these lines I am gazing into the workhouse yard’ testifies to the accuracy of the account, but the equation of ‘writing’ and ‘gazing’ also suggests that these two activities are analogous.¹⁷ This comparison of looking and narrative composition renders the process of writing actively intrusive, as the author’s pen mimics the penetrating line of the author’s gaze into the workhouse yard. The authorial gaze attempts to pierce the hidden spaces of the workhouse, but, despite the institution’s close physical proximity to his own private home, it remains shut off to this member of the public.

While Scott chronicles the workhouse yard from the safety of the domestic home, other writers sought closer encounters with pauperism, exploring the workhouse from the inside. These investigative narratives place emphasis upon the importance of experiencing the workhouse first-hand. The short narrative ‘Visit to an English Workhouse’ (1837), published in *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal*, reprints an article from the *Dumfries and Galloway Courier*, in which the narrator cites his friend’s favourable opinion of a workhouse. In the wake of the New Poor Law, the anonymous friend is reported to have tired of the controversy surrounding the new workhouse system and decided to ‘substitute for endless discussion the evidence furnished by his own senses’.¹⁸ Desiring a full sensory experience of the workhouse, the visitor thus goes to the unusual lengths of arranging to become an ‘amateur boarder’ in the workhouse, ‘an experiment, which perhaps no other gentleman has made’.¹⁹ The writer legitimises his workhouse visit by imagining it in terms of a scientific ‘experiment’. Unlike the ‘Amateur Casual’s’ later exploration of the Lambeth casual ward,

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ ‘Visit to an English Workhouse’, *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal*, 23 September 1837, p. 277.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

discussed in chapter one, this ‘boarder’s’ attempt to discover workhouse life first-hand seems rather half-hearted: his identification of himself as a ‘gentleman’ constructs a clear divide between himself and the inmates and, while he ‘confined himself strictly to the fare or diet of the house’, he preferred not to share the paupers’ sleeping quarters.²⁰ The text implies that, by consuming the same food as the inmates, a middle-class visitor can obtain a literal taste of the workhouse. Perhaps not surprisingly, seeing as he first became ‘acquainted’ with the master, the ‘amateur boarder’ gives a favourable report of the workhouse fare and extravagantly asserts that ‘I have seen and tasted all the articles – they are all good; in fact, so much so, that I could myself board permanently in the house with comfort’.²¹ By contrast to the sensational claims of starvation that proliferated in the aftermath of the passing of the New Poor Law, and the plaintive request of Oliver Twist for more food earlier in 1837, this text seeks to quell public outcry about the diet given to paupers. This account of the workhouse claims authority over the myriad of discussions in contemporary discourse, as the author has the weight of experience and gentlemanly status to support his claims.

‘Visit to an English Workhouse’ is an early form of workhouse investigative journalism that comes down firmly on the side of the New Poor Law. Workhouse journalism became increasingly prominent as the century progressed and, unlike the short and generalised report reprinted in *Chambers’s Edinburgh Journal*, sought to provide detailed accounts of the workhouse space. The majority of journalistic reports are far from favourable. These accounts attempt to pry into the hidden workhouse buildings in order to make the space known to readers and to stir up public objection about the treatment of the poor. They expose to readers, in the comfort of their homes, the bureaucratic failings of the workhouse system and reveal the human suffering of paupers living in these institutions.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

Though Charles Dickens's most famous anti-workhouse protest is in *Oliver Twist*, he also penned or published in his journals a series of investigative narratives that explored the state of workhouses.²² In 'A Walk in a Workhouse' (1850), published in *Household Words*, the narrative is equivocal about the workhouse; it represents some areas positively while condemning others. In the opening of the text, Dickens describes how, '[a] few Sundays ago, I formed one of the congregation assembled in the chapel of a large metropolitan Workhouse' and subsequently toured the institution.²³ The title word 'walk' implies a sense of the narrator as tourist, and emphasises his immediacy to the workhouse surroundings.²⁴ It is not the 'usual supplications' of the service that engage the visitor's interest, but the unusual congregation that he finds himself among.²⁵ The paupers present include 'evil-looking young women, and beetle-browed young men' and the '[m]umbling, blear-eyed, spectacled, stupid, deaf, [and] lame' elderly.²⁶ In particular, the narrative lingers on the grotesque depiction of the aged inmates, describing them as 'weird old women, all skeleton' or 'ugly old crones [...] with a ghastly kind of contentment upon them'.²⁷ The 'ghastly' description of the women renders them other in the text and constructs the workhouse as a quasi-supernatural space.²⁸ Despite the claims of the narrative to factuality, these real-life paupers recall the fictional workhouse hags in *Oliver Twist*; in the novel, the face of one elderly inmate is said to

²² Juliet John discusses the use of the personal mode in Dickens' periodicals: 'As a reformer, Dickens believed it his political and ethical duty to direct and help the public by the most effective means. The most effective means [...] necessitated to Dickens the deployment of the personal mode and the rhetorical construction of the idea of an intimacy between himself and a unified public which ideally transcended barriers of class.' For more information, see Juliet John, *Dickens and Mass Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 102-130 (p. 128)

²³ [Charles Dickens], 'A Walk in a Workhouse', *Household Words*, 25 May 1850, pp. 204-207 (p. 204).

²⁴ David Seed comments upon the importance of walking in Dickens's city sketches, pointing out that '[w]alking had a number of advantages over any other means of transport. It gave him potential access to the most obscure parts of London; it set a gradual pace where observation could be linked to reflection; and, unlike the accelerated speed of railway travel, it presented no physical barrier between the traveller and his visual field'. See David Seed, 'Touring the Metropolis: The Shifting Subjects of Dickens's London Sketches', *The Yearbook of English Studies*, 34 (2004), 155-170 (p. 157).

²⁵ [Dickens], 'A Walk in a Workhouse', p. 204.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ For a discussion of old women and the workhouse in Dickens's texts, see Karen Chase, *The Victorians and Old Age* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

‘[resemble] more the grotesque shaping of some wild pencil, than the work of Nature’s hand’.²⁹ The sense of aberration in *Oliver Twist* is implicit in ‘A Walk in a Workhouse’, suggesting that fact and fiction intermingle in this so-called truthful account. At the same time as they attempt an objective exposé of conditions, voyeuristic first-person accounts such as this seem frequently to slide into a discourse of sensationalism.

Despite Dickens’s attempt to map the workhouse, ‘a little world of poverty’, it remains an unknowable site within the metropolitan landscape.³⁰ The workhouse is constructed in places as a labyrinthine wilderness; as the intrepid visitor explores the workhouse ‘scenery’, he encounters ‘several ugly old women crouching, witch-like, round a hearth, and chattering and nodding, after the manner of the monkies’.³¹ The animalistic language used to describe these women is employed later in the narrative to represent the refractory boys who ‘slunk about, like dispirited wolves or hyænas; and made a pounce at their food when it was served out, much as those animals do’.³² Likening the paupers to wild animals caged by the workhouse walls, the visitor creates a sense of himself as on a voyeuristic safari through the zoological gardens.³³ The spaces of the workhouse accumulate within the narrative as the visitor moves around the institution (‘[i]n a room’, ‘in another room’, ‘in the Infant School’, ‘in one place’), but there is a lack of specificity about how these spaces connect to one another or what they look like;³⁴ any sense of the workhouse

²⁹ Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, ed. Kathleen Tillotson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 185.

³⁰ [Dickens], ‘A Walk in a Workhouse’, p. 205. David Seed points out that, ‘[I]ike other Victorian commentators on London, Dickens resituated exploration nearer to the reader’s familiar territory and engaged in a kind of local tourism that ironically implies both the proximity to the reader of the places he visits and the unfamiliarity of those places’. See Seed, ‘Touring the Metropolis’, p. 157.

³¹ [Dickens], ‘A Walk in a Workhouse’, pp. 206, 205.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 206.

³³ The poor are frequently likened to animals in investigative accounts of the workhouse and of the poor more generally. The narrator of ‘Convivial Pauperism’, published in *Saint Paul’s Magazine*, recalls that ‘[t]he dangerous patients, the maniacs, were strapped to their beds in a separate room, guarded by two big keepers. Some, we noticed, were devouring their food like beasts [...and...] their fearful howling and yelling soon drove us away’. James Pitt, ‘Convivial Pauperism’, *Saint Paul’s Magazine*, February 1871, pp. 435-443 (pp. 438-439).

³⁴ [Dickens], ‘A Walk in a Workhouse’, pp. 205, 206.

interior being mapped eventually collapses into a sense of chaos as Dickens is confronted with

[g]roves of babies in arms; groves of mothers and other sickwomen in bed; groves of lunatics; jungles of men in stone-paved down-stairs day-rooms waiting for their dinners; longer and longer groves of old people, in upstairs Infirmary wards, wearing out life....³⁵

The collective description of the paupers as ‘groves’ depersonalises them into an unquantifiable mass. It seems that both the workhouse and the paupers elude the visitor’s ability to map the space objectively.

Chapter three of Dickens’s factual narrative *The Uncommercial Traveller* (1860) is similar in style to ‘A Walk in a Workhouse’. Having read that the Wapping workhouse does not categorise female inmates according to moral character and behaviour, the ‘Traveller’ sets off with the intention of discovering how ‘the fact really stood’.³⁶ He quickly becomes lost in the city and eventually finds himself by a stretch of water, known by, a spectral-like passerby informs him, the macabre name of ‘Mister Baker’s Trap’:

‘A common place for suicide,’ said I, looking down at the locks.
‘Sue?’ returned the ghost, with a stare. ‘Yes! And Poll. Likeways Emly [*sic*]. And Nancy. And Jane.’³⁷

The passerby explains that those women pulled out alive are ‘carried into the werkiss’, suggesting the grim association between this space of female suicide and the institution.³⁸

Treading the same path as those would-be suicides, the Traveller eventually finds himself at

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 206. By contrast, Seed draws attention to ‘the careful mapping of routes’ in the *Uncommercial Traveller*, a device that ‘offers [the] possibility of access to the reader’. See Seed, ‘Touring the Metropolis’, p. 158.

³⁶ [Charles Dickens], ‘The Uncommercial Traveller’, *All the Year Round*, 18 February 1860, pp. 392-396 (p. 392).

³⁷ *Ibid.* Julian Wolfreys writes on the convergence of the comic and the gothic in the uncanny body of the passerby. He suggests that ‘the scene is set up through the body of this ghostly creature, especially in that humorous *rictus* and in the voice of the drowned’. See Julian Wolfreys, “‘I wants to make your flesh creep’: Notes toward a Reading of the Comic-Gothic in Dickens’, in *Victorian Gothic: Literary and Cultural Manifestations in the Nineteenth Century*, eds. Ruth Robbins and Julian Wolfreys (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000), pp. 31-59 (p. 40).

³⁸ [Dickens], ‘The Uncommercial Traveller’, p. 393.

the workhouse where he is ‘wholly unexpected and quite unknown’.³⁹ Instead of being turned away, however, the pleasant matron intimates that ‘[h]e was welcome to see everything. Such as it was, there it all was’.⁴⁰ The invitation for him to inspect everything suggests the idea of the workhouse interior being laid bare to the voyeuristic gaze of the visitor and reader alike. The narrative implies that it will recreate for readers everything that Dickens saw.

After visiting the foul wards, which are ‘monstrously’ inappropriate for the sick women occupying them, Dickens is taken to see the refractory girls at work in the oakum-picking room.⁴¹ The traveller’s gaze is problematized by these refractory girls. Rather than passively submitting to his voyeurism, the girls are forthcoming in their addresses: “‘I’m sure I’d be thankful,” protested the Chief, looking sideways at the Uncommercial, “If I could be got into a place, or got abroad”’.⁴² This coquettish request subverts ideas of deference, and draws attention to it here as a social pose exploited by the poor in order to receive the assistance of a visitor. The narrative informs readers that these paupers are aged between sixteen and twenty years of age, but there is no sense of them as the vulnerable young girls that they really are or of any sympathy with their predicament. Instead, the visitor collectively refers to them as ‘Refractories’ and nicknames them ‘Chief’, ‘Oakum Head’, ‘Number Two’ and ‘Skirmishers’.⁴³ These names depersonalise the pauper girls and eclipse any idea of individuality; no connection is suggested between them and the tragic figures of ‘Sue’, ‘Poll’, ‘[Emily]’ and ‘Nancy’. Following Dickens’ admonishment of their behaviour, the Chief points out that ‘[i]t ain’t no good being nothink else here’.⁴⁴ The description of the refractory room functions as entertainment in the narrative and obscures the underlying social causes

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 394.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 395. Seed points out that Dickens’s ‘visits to workhouses, schools, and hospitals resemble tours of inspection where his need to observe risks implicating him in the official administration of such institutions’. See Seed, ‘Touring the Metropolis’, p. 169.

that have resulted in the young women's stay in the workhouse and their behaviour within it. When the Traveller leaves the room, their gaze continues to follow him and, whenever he glances out of any window towards the yard, he sees 'all the [...] Refractories looking out at their low window for me, and never failing to catch me'.⁴⁵ No longer the voyeur, it is now the visitor who is the unwilling object of the gaze.

In 1867, Dickens wrote an angry letter to J. C. Parkinson, one of the contributors to *All the Year Round*, in which he instructed him to write an article by the title of 'What is Sensational?'⁴⁶ The letter opens with the instruction that '[u]nder this title I want the most ferocious and bitter attack made upon Mr Hardy of the Poor Law Board, that can possibly be made by a writer who respects himself and his position'.⁴⁷ Dickens's anger stemmed from a speech that had been made by Gathorne Hardy, the president of the Poor Law Board, in which he accused journalists of writing sensationally about the maltreatment of paupers in workhouse infirmaries.⁴⁸ Incensed by what he interpreted as Hardy's attempt to downplay the scandalous care of sick paupers, Dickens continued in his letter '[w]hat does he mean by Sensational? Is it Sensational to tell the Truth? [...] Is it sensational to be poor, abject, wretched, dying?'⁴⁹ Parkinson's article was published in March 1867 and, as requested by Dickens, is a scathing attack on the Poor Law Board.

'A Workhouse Probe', 'Another Workhouse Probe' and 'A Country Workhouse', were published in *All the Year Round* between 30th November and 14th December 1867 and

⁴⁵ [Dickens], 'The Uncommercial Traveller', p. 395.

⁴⁶ I have discussed J. C. Parkinson's workhouse journalism in a published essay. See Laura Foster, "'Probing" the Workhouse in *All the Year Round*', in *Charles Dickens and the Mid-Victorian Press, 1850-1870*, eds. Hazel Mackenzie and Ben Winyard (Buckingham: University of Buckingham Press, 2013), pp. 71-80.

⁴⁷ Charles Dickens, 'To J. C. Parkinson', headed 'What is Sensational', in *The Letters of Charles Dickens*, vol. 11, ed. Graham Storey (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), pp. 314-315 (p. 314).

⁴⁸ Hardy's speech was reported in 'Imperial Parliament', *Daily News*, 9 February 1867, p. 2. Referring to reports made upon conditions at the Strand and Rotherhithe workhouses, Hardy suggested that '[t]hese transactions were turned about, by a portion of the press, as it were, in a kaleidoscope, and shifted into every variety of shape, causing a sensation not unreasonable or unnatural, but wholly disproportionate to the circumstances'. *Ibid.* A portion of the speech is referred to in the editorial notes to Dickens' letter, as well as the circumstances of the deaths of Timothy Daly and Richard Gibson, whom Hardy mentioned in his speech. See Dickens, 'To J. C. Parkinson', p. 315.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

are also attributed to J. C. Parkinson.⁵⁰ In these articles, the narrator pokes and pries into the hidden corners of three workhouses and attempts objectively to represent the workhouse space to readers. By dramatising the human suffering that exists within workhouses, these articles seek to demonstrate what Dickens had angrily stated in his letter months earlier: that the truth is implicitly sensational.

The first article, ‘A Workhouse Probe’, informs readers that the narrator is accompanying the *Lancet* Sanitary Commission on their investigations.⁵¹ This medical association, together with the title word ‘probe’ of the first two articles, suggests an objective and quasi-scientific analysis of the workhouse. However, as in ‘A Walk in a Workhouse’, these articles withhold from readers the specifics of names or exact locations and their seeming factuality is further compromised by veiled allusions to fictional novels. In ‘A Workhouse Probe’, the workhouse is described as being akin to ‘Wemmick’s Walworth fortress’, which is a reference to *Great Expectations*.⁵² The pauper nurse in ‘Another Workhouse Probe’ is likened to ‘Smike’ from *Nicholas Nickleby* and the baker to ‘Mr Tulliver’ in *The Mill on the Floss*.⁵³ Similarly, the paid nurse in ‘A Country Workhouse’ reminds the narrator of ‘Miss Miggs’, a character who appears in *Barnaby Rudge*.⁵⁴ The articles’ analysis of the workhouse thus relies upon a novelistic vocabulary that is assumed to be shared by readers.

Amongst the most obvious faults found in the institution are a cess pit that lies beneath the infirmary windows, and privies that are reported to be ‘disgustingly unfit for human use’.⁵⁵ But the narrator also acknowledges the cleanliness and contentment of the

⁵⁰ Ella Ann Oppenlander, *Dickens’ All the Year Round: Descriptive Index and Contributor List* (New York: Whitson Publishing Company, 1984), pp. 195-196.

⁵¹ See chapter one for further discussion of the *Lancet* reports.

⁵² [J. C. Parkinson], ‘A Workhouse Probe’, *All the Year Round*, 30 November 1867, pp. 541-545 (p. 541).

⁵³ [J. C. Parkinson], ‘Another Workhouse Probe’, *All the Year Round*, 7 December 1867, pp. 558-564 (pp. 560, 563).

⁵⁴ [J. C. Parkinson], ‘A Country Workhouse’, *All the Year Round*, 14 December 1867, pp. 16-20 (p. 20).

⁵⁵ [Parkinson], ‘A Workhouse Probe’, p. 541.

paupers and, as they progress further through the workhouse, they observe the matron's kindness to the children. In the kitchens, the visitors 'peer' into the soup coppers at the 'appetising' meal being prepared for the inmates and the narrator declares that they are 'hungry enough to envy the paupers'.⁵⁶

The second half of the text disrupts any sense of ambivalence that readers may have about the workhouse, however, as it moves into a direct attack upon the workhouse guardians and the Poor Law Board. The narrator points out that the guardians, whose role it is to objectively oversee the establishment, are tradesmen who benefit financially from farming out workhouse contracts to one another. In particular, the text draws attention to the infringement of Poor Law regulations in the fact that the head guardian is also the workhouse landlord. But it is the district inspector, as the representative of the Poor Law Board, who the article sets out to lampoon. As evidence of the inspector's failure to report abuses, the narrator says,

[L]et us turn, then, to the visiting-book, and see how the official visitor, who is already celebrated for his discharge of duty at Farnham, has performed this duty. His inspections have been made with great regularity twice a year, and 'Wards in good order,' 'Satisfactory,' 'Very satisfactory,' form the staple of his monotonous remarks. Not a syllable concerning sanitary arrangements, closets, cess pools, classification, or the ownership of the house.⁵⁷

The inspector is identified here as the same responsible for the atrocities of the Farnham workhouse. A similar attack is made upon the inspector in the *Lancet* article about this institution, which asserts that '[t]here is little trace in the inspector's work at Farnham of the seeing eye, the hearing ear, or the smelling nose'.⁵⁸ The failings of the inspector also attracted the attention of *Punch*. The short article 'A Probe in the Poorhouse' (1867) renders this Poor Law inspector a figure of public ridicule by suggesting that 'Poor-Law Neglecter' would be a

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 542.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 544.

⁵⁸ 'The Lancet Sanitary Commission for Investigating the State of the Infirmaries of Workhouses; Country Workhouse Infirmaries. No. III. Farnham (Near Aldershot.)', *Lancet*, 19 October 1867, pp. 496-498 (p. 498).

more appropriate title for him.⁵⁹ The failure of official visitors to carry out their duties of inspection places more importance on the role of the unofficial visitor in the detection of workhouse abuses. In contrast to the Poor Law inspector's wilful blindness, the visitors in workhouse journalism peer into the corners of the workhouse, note the smells and listen to the inmates.

'A Workhouse Probe' concludes that the only restraint to the mismanagement of workhouses is 'publicity' and suggests that '[o]ur workhouses must no longer be close boroughs, jobbed and managed, or mismanaged, by a clique or coterie. Inspection must be in the hands of the ratepayers'.⁶⁰ The article thus suggests that workhouses should be opened up to the scrutiny of the public who pay for them. The belief that publicity is a solution to these Poor Law evils suggests the political importance of the press and the social and moral responsibility placed upon readers to enquire into the state of workhouses.

Unlike 'A Workhouse Probe', 'Another Workhouse Probe' and 'A Country Workhouse' are unrelenting in their criticism of the two workhouses they examine. Though the exploration of the workhouses is an attempt to familiarise readers with these shady institutions, the articles simultaneously reiterate the inherent otherness of the workhouse space. A macabre vocabulary is inscribed upon the building in 'Another Workhouse Probe': the wards are likened to a 'living tomb', that is no more homely than a morgue.⁶¹ Even the most mundane rooms of the workhouse hold strange and disturbing sights. In the laundry, for example, the visiting party encounter 'an imbecile female dwarf of sixty' who is described as 'rubbing her brown and wizened bust with soapsuds with a slow deliberate motion'.⁶² In response to the visitor's enquiries, she gives 'the most grotesquely hideous grimace it has

⁵⁹ 'A Probe in the Poorhouse', *Punch*, 2 November 1867, p. 178.

⁶⁰ [Parkinson], 'A Workhouse Probe', p. 544.

⁶¹ [Parkinson], 'Another Workhouse Probe', p. 563.

⁶² *Ibid.*

been our fortune to see save in a gargoyle or a pantomime'.⁶³ Similarly, in 'A Country Workhouse', the elderly paupers hold an eerie fascination for the visitor. Described as '[a] semicircle of clay figures whose breathing arrangements continued somehow after life had fled', these men are likened by the narrator to living corpses.⁶⁴ There is a sense of voyeurism implicit in the narrator's contemplation of these paupers: the text suggests that there is something 'awe-inspiring in humanity from which the spirit seems to be already winging its flight'.⁶⁵ The article thus positions the reader alongside the narrator as the voyeur of human suffering.

Of particular concern in 'Another Workhouse Probe' is the harshness of the disciplinary treatment that is meted out to the aged. Describing the haggard condition of the old men forced to work outside in the workhouse yard, the text points out that they are in need of comforts, not punishment. The comment that 'to leave them neglected in an open outhouse, is simply shortening their lives' incriminates the workhouse system with responsibility for their deaths.⁶⁶ The incongruity between the intended function of the workhouses and their actual purpose is emphasised by the article's comment upon the sleeping wards of these feeble old men. The room would, the narrator laments, 'be excellent for healthy vigorous lads, but is desolately penal for the decrepit wretches sleeping in it, men of seventy, eighty and ninety'.⁶⁷ The article reveals that, at night, these men are left wholly unattended and have no method of contacting the master in case of illness.

The narrative subsequently draws attention to the results that stem from this neglectful practice of locking up the paupers. The article refers to the case of an old man who fell out of bed and died in the Bethnal Green workhouse. The man's body was left there until the next morning because the wardensman was unable to easily contact the master. The text explains

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ [Parkinson], 'A Country Workhouse', p. 18.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ [Parkinson], 'Another Workhouse Probe', p. 561.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

that, as a result of the public outcry, an investigation was launched that ended in the exoneration of all the officials involved and the announcement that there were bells in the workhouse that the wardsman could have rung. The narrator informs readers that ‘it happened, however, to the present writer to feel doubtful concerning this pauper’s death’.⁶⁸ Having taken on the role of a detective, and conducted his own investigation, the narrator reveals that the bells were only put up after the man’s death and that they are, what he terms, ‘the accident of publicity’.⁶⁹ As well as referring to this incident, ‘Another Workhouse Probe’ also draws upon various cases of neglect in workhouse infirmaries; in particular, the narrator condemns the widespread use of pauper nurses and points out that that,

[i]t was a pauper nurse at the Holborn Union workhouse who, on her own responsibility, plunged the dying Timothy Daly into a warm bath on an inclement day in December; and a pauper nurse who improperly applied fuller’s-earth to his sores. It was a pauper nurse who, at last, mercifully killed off Richard Gibson, at the St Giles’s Union, by giving him gin; and a pauper wardsman who left Robert Scolly to die unaided, on finding ‘he could not, or would not, answer’ when asked whether he were ill.⁷⁰

By referring to incidents that were widely condemned in the newspapers, the text situates itself within a factual reality and adds weight to its campaign for reform.

The conclusion of ‘Another Workhouse Probe’ notes the illustrious people, including a duchess, a lord and a duke, who have expressed their approval of the workhouse in the visitors’ book. By satirising the glowing comments left by these visitors and, in particular, the Duchess’s enthusiasm for the workhouse, the article covertly suggests that the systemic nature of workhouse cruelties is endorsed by the blindness of the social elite. The older paternalistic system in which the aristocracy cared for the poor on their estates has been grotesquely refigured into a system in which the social elite unseeingly approve the maltreatment of the poor. The failure of visitors to ameliorate the conditions of workhouse

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 562.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁰ *Ibid.* The findings of the inquiry held into the death of Richard Scolly, a hawker, are reported in *The Times*. See ‘Bethnal-Green Workhouse’, *The Times*, 15 January 1866, p. 12.

inmates is suggested by the pauper in *Jack the Giant Killer*. In the story, this man informs Jack that he was an inmate in the house when Jack once toured it:

I was in the bed under the winder, and I says to my pardner (there were two on us), says I, — ‘That chap looks as if he might do us a turn.’ ‘Not he,’ says my pardner. ‘They are werry charitable, and come and stare at us; that’s all’, says he.⁷¹

Here, the text implicitly satirises the ostensibly well-meaning visitors who visit the institution in order to observe the workhouse paupers, but in fact do nothing to alleviate their condition.

Of the three articles, ‘A Country Workhouse’ offers the most damning representation of a workhouse. The opening of the article informs readers that the party are ‘[s]till on the track of shameful, flagrant abuses; still fighting the drearily uphill fight against highly sanctioned cruelties and legally committed wrong’.⁷² The emphasis on the ‘legal’ and ‘sanctioned’ nature of the ‘cruelties’ and ‘wrong’ suggests the inherent criminality of the ruling authorities and constructs the visitors as subversive crusaders against the state-approved inhumanities of the Poor Law Board. Upon glimpsing an imposing workhouse from the railway-carriage window, the party decide instead to inspect that institution first; the narrator recalls that ‘[i]ts physiognomy was enough [to justify the detour], and its internal character was fully in accordance with what we had seen written on its face’.⁷³ The reference to ‘physiognomy’ personifies the workhouse and constructs the sense of the visitor’s narrative account as akin to a dissection of the union workhouse. The visitor becomes, by implication, an anatomist seeking to explore the internal spaces of the workhouse.

As in ‘Another Workhouse Probe’, ‘A Country Workhouse’ calls attention to the inadequacies of the workhouse and the officials. The master’s authority is subverted when the narrative describes how the visiting party mistook him for the gardener. His lower-class status is confirmed by his revelation that he used to be the porter and that he is now looking

⁷¹ Anne Thackeray-Ritchie, *Jack the Giant Killer* (1867; Boston: Loring, 1868), p. 21.

⁷² [Parkinson], ‘A Country Workhouse’, p. 16.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 17.

forward to being, as he terms it, ‘superannuated’.⁷⁴ The article’s quotation of the master’s mispronunciation pokes fun at the ignorance of this man who is the social superior of the paupers alone. The master’s ‘wholesome reverence for “his gentlemen,” and his pastors, masters, and superiors generally’ implicitly emphasises the greater social standing of the visitors.⁷⁵

Though far superior in terms of social class, the visiting party in this text are implicitly brought down to size by one of the paupers. In the text, the windows are a source of outrage for the visitors: they are placed so high that it is impossible to look out from them. In response to the visitors’ evident preoccupation with this subject, a pauper in the sick ward offers them a piece of advice: he says, ‘[L]ie on yer back for three weeks – lie here on yer back, and then ye’ll know more than ye’ll get by poking about with a pencil and a little book and asking questions about winders’.⁷⁶ The pauper’s words caricature the visitors and strip these social investigators of any grandiose pretensions to being humanitarian crusaders. Rather than ‘probing’ the workhouse, they are, in fact, interpreted by the paupers as pointlessly ‘poking about’.

Though the articles seek to shed light on the interiors of workhouses, the narrator, when describing his tour of the sick ward, suggests that ‘[i]t would be improper to detail in these columns the worst of the evils rampant here’.⁷⁷ The narrator’s reticence to ‘detail’ abuses in *All the Year Round* is at odds with the apparent aim to open up the workhouses to the public eye. The implication that the abuses witnessed are too disturbing to be committed to print and read by even the socially aware readers of *All the Year Round* is a technique employed in sensational narratives. The comment reminds readers of a selective narrator whose representation of the workhouse is a textual construct. In contrast to the ostensible aim

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 19.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

to ‘probe’ the workhouse, the narrative comment unintentionally suggests that any objective scrutiny of the workhouse is obscured by the narrator’s own agenda.

Like the articles previously discussed, the narrator of ‘Convivial Pauperism’ (1871), published in *Saint Paul’s Magazine*, displays a similarly authoritative attitude towards the workhouse. In this text, the narrator is invited by his friend, a Poor Law guardian, to ‘pass an hour or two at the workhouse’ on Christmas day.⁷⁸ The reliance of visitors upon a fictional framework through which to interpret the workhouse is yet again apparent in ‘Convivial Pauperism’ as the narrator views an ‘awe-inspiring board-room, where Oliver Twist and the sweep *must* have been only five minutes before’.⁷⁹ Although the invitation suggests that the visit is akin to a leisure activity, the narrator takes it upon himself to ‘[inspect]’ and ‘examine’ the workhouse, suggesting his self-imposed sense of officialdom.⁸⁰ After enjoying a Christmas meal provided by the workhouse, the visitor begins to tour the building with the master and matron. The presence of these house officials, however, serves to obstruct a full exploration of the space; as the narrator comments, ‘[t]he master and matron were both excessively attentive to us, too attentive for my purpose, as they tried to hurry us through the different rooms’.⁸¹ Responding to the visitor’s ‘hint to this effect’, the guardian takes the keys in order that they might ‘[pursue] our investigations alone’.⁸² The narrator’s mention of his ‘purpose’ implies that, although not present in a business capacity, he takes on an official role when inside the workhouse. By taking the keys, the visitor and the guardian symbolically appropriate control of the workhouse and exert their right to move freely through the pauper space. The visitor’s desire to elude the scrutiny of the master and matron suggests his expectation that he will be prying out secrets from the house.

⁷⁸ Pitt, ‘Convivial Pauperism’, p. 435.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 436.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 437.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 437.

The visitor finds much at fault in the workhouse and, as in previous accounts, exposes the unnecessary suffering of inmates. There is, however, a tension between the pathos of the suffering inmates and the carnivalesque description of the visitors' encounter with the madwomen. Described as being 'noisy as birds in a rookery', the women dance, sing, and terrify the narrator's friend by pushing him dangerously high on a swing in their room.⁸³ A voyeuristic thrill seeker, the visitor thoroughly enjoys the excitement of witnessing female insanity first-hand and thinks that being forcibly shaken by an old lady is 'an excellent joke'.⁸⁴ The reader's vicarious enjoyment of this display is undercut, however, when the insane woman is punched to the ground by an attendant, then carried off to 'undergo some sort of punishment', which neither the visitor nor the reader is privy to.⁸⁵ For the narrator, the workhouse has literally become a theatre of spectacle: the workhouse and paupers are, respectively, 'the stage and the actors' and the concluding violence is termed the '*finale* to our otherwise agreeable sojourn and entertainment'.⁸⁶

Mrs Brewer's visiting narratives 'Workhouse Life in Town and Country' (1889-1890) suggest the power of investigative journalism to enforce progress and reform; as one of the articles points out, 'facts are among the best aids to future work'.⁸⁷ Similarly to the previous accounts, the visitor-narrator assumes an official persona in her examination of the workhouse: thus, when Brewer visits the Liverpool workhouse, she recalls that,

[i]t was strange to us to be called sharply to account two or three times on our way from the gate to the master's office, and our name and business at each point

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 440.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 441.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ Mrs Brewer, 'Workhouse Life in Town and Country. [...] St. Leonard's, Shoreditch.', *Sunday at Home*, 30 November 1889, pp. 74-77 (p.74). Despite the emphasis on fact, even this narrative cannot avoid invoking *Oliver Twist*; in the narrative of Marylebone workhouse, Brewer describes witnessing a man receiving extra potatoes and suggests that '[o]ne could not help thinking of poor Oliver Twist asking for "more," and how differently his appeal was met'. Mrs Brewer, 'Workhouse Life in Town and Country. III. A Visit to Marylebone.', *Sunday at Home*, 17 August 1889, pp. 524-526 (p. 526).

demanded. Indeed, the scrutiny was as strict as though we had been trying stealthily to creep into a haven of rest unawares.⁸⁸

Mrs Brewer's affront at being questioned is palpable here and suggests her perception of the workhouse as a public space, to which she has implicit right of access; in this narrative, the visiting party's scrutiny of the workhouse is reflected back at them, making them subject to the panoptic gaze of the institution.

Despite the numerous accounts of the workhouses that proliferated during this century, Brewer anticipates a readership that knows nothing about these institutions; at the beginning of the narrative of the Marylebone union workhouse, she states that she will give 'a very minute account of this workhouse, because so few know anything of the life within workhouses generally'.⁸⁹ The narratives provide a more meticulous and less sensational 'inspection' of the institution than do the narratives of *Household Words* or *All the Year Round*, detailing the wards, interior design, layout and ventilation of the building; there is a sense in these texts of the visitor building up a 'minute' picture of the workhouse for the reader and drawing attention to formerly hidden corners of this institution.

At the end of the century, Brewer's narratives provide a similarly didactic message to that implied by Scott's article in the *Odd Fellow* more than forty years earlier. They suggest that poverty is the fault of the individual rather than social circumstance and point out that 'it is quite a small proportion [of inmates] who find themselves launched into pauperism by causes outside themselves'.⁹⁰ Though the didactic messages promulgated by the workhouse institution are principally aimed at the poor, 'Workhouse Life' offers a subliminal didactic message to comfortable readers of *Sunday at Home*. In particular, Mrs Brewer assigns the blame for pauperism to alcohol and reiterates this connection across her many narrative

⁸⁸ Mrs Brewer, 'Workhouse Life in Town and Country. [...] Liverpool Workhouse and Infirmary', *Sunday at Home*, 26 July 1890, pp. 617- 620 (p. 617).

⁸⁹ Brewer, 'III. – A Visit to Marylebone', p. 524.

⁹⁰ Mrs Brewer, 'Workhouse Life in Town and Country. [...] Chapter VI. – A Visit to Islington Workhouse.', *Sunday at Home*, 26 October 1889, pp. 681-684 (p. 681).

instalments: she notes that, in workhouses, there ‘are representatives of many classes [...and...] occasionally may be seen a prince, a count, a barrister, a doctor of music [...]– the cause, Drink’.⁹¹ The representation of the cross-class selection of inmates implicitly acts as a didactic warning to readers about the possible consequences of profligacy, reminding them that their social position does not offer them immunity from the workhouse.

The Angel in the Workhouse

The previous accounts are all concerned with visits paid to the workhouse on a one-off basis for the purposes of exploration and reform. While these narratives construct the visitor as a quasi-official, another form of workhouse visiting saw the member of the public becoming a sympathetic friend to the paupers.⁹² Though these visitors had the similar object of bringing workhouse conditions to the attention of the public, their immediate aim was not to tour the workhouse, but to build up an acquaintance with the deserving paupers over a series of visits, in order to alleviate their suffering. Following the Poor Law Amendment Act, many of those who had survived on outdoor relief topped up by the charity of a visitor were left with no option but to go into the workhouse; Anne Summers explains that ‘women began to seek admission as visitors of workhouses in order to keep in touch with particular inmates whom they had known and patronised “outdoors”’, and that the practice of visiting paupers was later fully inaugurated by the establishment of the Workhouse Visiting Society in the late 1850s.⁹³ The society was formed for ‘[t]he sake of showing interest in the inmates by reading,

⁹¹ Brewer, ‘III- A Visit to Marylebone’, p. 525.

⁹² There is some overlap between investigative journalism and the narratives of lady visitors: the accounts by lady visitors are often similar in style to journalistic explorations of the workhouse space.

⁹³ Summers, ‘A Home from Home’, p. 47. Norman Longmate provides a brief history of workhouse visiting and of Louisa Twining’s role in the foundation of the Workhouse Visiting Society. See Norman Longmate, *The Workhouse: A Social History* (London: Temple Smith, 1974), pp. 141-142.

instruction, and cheering the dull sad lives of the sick and aged' and outlined its three main purposes as:

1. For befriending the destitute and orphan children while in the schools, and after they are placed in situations; 2. For the instruction and comfort of the sick and afflicted; 3. For the benefit of girls of good character as well as of the ignorant and depraved.⁹⁴

The Society and its *Journal*, which was published between 1859 and 1865, led the crusade for the improvement of workhouse conditions and emphasised the moral influence regular visits from respectable visitors could have over the degraded workhouse inmates.⁹⁵ These workhouse visitors played a significant role in increasing the visibility of the workhouses and drawing public attention to the need for reform.⁹⁶

Before the inauguration of the Society, applications from would-be lady visitors to offer comfort and to read improving literature to the paupers were usually met with rejection by the all-male boards of workhouse guardians.⁹⁷ In 'Recollections of a London Workhouse, Forty Years Ago' (1889) in the *English Woman's Review*, the author recalls how, in 1847, she first turned up at the door of her local workhouse 'armed with a letter from Lord Torrington, who was then in office, to get leave to go through it'.⁹⁸ The narrator's attempt to

⁹⁴ Cited in [Twining?], 'The Duty of Workhouse Visiting', p. 261. See also, 'The Objects and Aims of the WVS', *Journal of the Workhouse Visiting Society*, I (1859), 3-11 (p. 3).

⁹⁵ Although the Society encouraged both men and women to become workhouse visitors, most of the visitors represented in workhouse literature are female. Gerard points out that 'charity was seen as the special duty of the female sex; women's nature was more suited to acts of benevolence'. See Gerard, 'Lady Bountiful', p. 189. In 1865, the *Journal* announced to its members that it would no longer be published as it had 'in some measure done the work that it was intended to accomplish' and owing to the 'considerable degree of sameness' that was inevitable in a publication that focused on a single topic. See 'A Letter to the Members of the Workhouse Visiting Society which all are requested to read', *Journal of the Workhouse Visiting Society*, XXXII (1865), 261-269 (p. 261).

⁹⁶ Summers points out that 'women agitated in every sphere to which they had access for the more humane treatment of children and the elderly, the separation of sick and healthy inmates, the creation of a workhouse infirmary system, and many other reforms'. See Summers, 'A Home from Home', p. 47.

⁹⁷ M. A. Crowther notes that '[c]harity was not permitted to enter the workhouse without a struggle. The Royal Commission of 1832 had not objected to charitable effort on behalf of the helpless inmates, but the Poor Law Commissioners disliked all public intrusion into the workhouse because of the possible disruption of "discipline"'. See M. A. Crowther, *The Workhouse System 1834-1829: The History of an English Social Institution* (London: Methuen, 1983), p. 68.

⁹⁸ S. E. De Morgan, 'Recollections of a London Workhouse, Forty Years Ago', *English Woman's Review*, 15 February 1889, pp. 49-58 (p. 51).

gain access to the workhouse was not successful and she recalls that ‘the porter at the outer door [...] shut it in my face, observing that he had something else to do than to take messages to the master, and that they knew nothing about lords there’.⁹⁹ The assumption that the letter provided by Lord Torrington would be enough to gain admittance is suggestive of an older social order in which the aristocracy personally knew and cared for the poor on their estate.¹⁰⁰ This paternalistic structure of charity was replaced under the New Poor Law by the impersonal workhouse test. The porter’s assertion that they ‘knew nothing about lords’ is indicative of the substitution of a system in which the gentry were important figures in the relief of the destitute, for one in which there were no longer ties of mutual obligation between rich and poor. In this text, the visitor’s aristocratic connections hold no value in the new workhouse system.

As this narrator’s experience demonstrates, the lady visitor depended upon the goodwill of the guardians and the in-house authorities. The rules which visitors were advised to follow implicitly illustrate the need to avoid causing any disruption to the running of the house. In *A Manual of Hints to Visiting Friends of the Poor* (1871), ‘Special Rules’ for workhouse visitors are set out in an appendix at the back.¹⁰¹ These rules advise that visits to workhouses should be made between 1.30 and 5pm, that visitors must not give money or food to the inmates and warn that visitors should avoid controversial topics. According to the manual, visits should last about one hour and should generally follow the set pattern of addressing each individual in the room on entering it and then reading aloud to the ward from

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁰ Gerard points out that ‘[p]aternalism became the dominant social outlook of the governing classes in the 1830s and 1840s. They assumed that the authoritarian, hierarchical, and organic community of the past, still founded on landed estates, was the ideal model for society. Stability and order could be achieved only in small spheres where everyone knew each other, linked by bonds of authority and deference, and by well-defined rights and duties’. See Gerard, ‘Lady Bountiful’, pp. 187-188.

¹⁰¹ H. A. A. Surridge, *A Manual of Hints to Visiting Friends of the Poor: with Appendices on Workhouse Visiting &c* (London: James Nisbet & co., 1871). The marginalised position of these ‘special’ workhouse rules suggests that this type of visiting was an extension of visiting the poor in their own homes. A list of rules is also included for members of the Workhouse Visiting Society in the first instalment of the *Journal*. See ‘The Following Rules are to be Observed’, *Journal of the Workhouse Visiting Society*, I (1859), 30.

‘some interesting and religiously instructive book’.¹⁰² The implied readers of the *Manual* are assumed to be exclusively female; the text specifically reminds a reader that her duty lies primarily within her own home and that she should never let an over-enthusiastic concern for the poor result in the neglect of her husband and children.

The first issue of the *Journal of the Workhouse Visiting Society* (1859) also draws attention to the need for lady visitors to fit themselves around the routine of the workhouse. It advises that visitors should ensure ‘a careful avoidance of all that may clash with existing rules and authorities, by giving way in all minor arrangements’.¹⁰³ As the advice suggests, the lady visitor had to be careful not to disrupt the hierarchy of the house, which was headed by the workhouse master and matron. Though the *Journal* contains correspondence from many women who describe warm welcomes from the master and matron, other accounts (for example, *An Old Inmate*, discussed in chapter two) describe the suspicious and jealous attitude displayed towards them by these house officials.¹⁰⁴ As the master and matron were usually from a social class nearer to that of the paupers than the visitors, it is understandable that the perceived interference of an affluent and socially-privileged lady visitor could sometimes provoke tension. In a letter included in the *Journal* in 1862, one visitor writes about the need for unbiased members of the public to inspect workhouses and report hidden abuses. The writer comments that ‘[t]ale bearing, of course, could not be encouraged, but I have seen a great deal that I dared not mention lest I should be accused of meddling’.¹⁰⁵ This fear of invoking the displeasure of the workhouse authorities suggests the problematic

¹⁰² Surridge, *A Manual of Hints*, p. 14.

¹⁰³ ‘The Objects and Aims of the WVS’, p. 10.

¹⁰⁴ One visitor wrote to the *Journal* that ‘[t]he master [...] objected to the admission of lady visitors to any department of the Workhouse, and considers that ladies are not even needed to find situations for any class of females’. ‘Report of a Visitor to a London Workhouse’, *Journal of the Workhouse Visiting Society*, XXXI (1864), 248-255 (p. 252). Elsewhere, another example describes how ‘in some way the jealousy of the Master was aroused, and, through him, the Chairman of the board was induced to inquire into this lady’s proceedings’. Upon writing to the Poor Law Board, the lady was ‘triumphantly informed’ that her visits contravened rules that prohibit visits except in the presence of an official. ‘A Letter to the Members of the Workhouse Visiting Society’, p. 268.

¹⁰⁵ ‘C’, Letter to Journal, *Journal of the Workhouse Visiting Society*, XXI (1862), 706-708 (p. 706).

position occupied by the lady visitor, who was liable to be prevented access to the inmates if she was seen to be interfering with the system. The term ‘meddling’ is loaded with ideas of gender and reduces any suggestions or observations articulated by the lady visitor to unimportant quibbling; if a lady visitor posed a threat to male-dominated workhouse authority, then the representation of her advice and recommendations as ‘meddling’ is suggestive of an attempt to limit the influence of a socially-superior female.

Central to discussions of the practice of workhouse visiting was whether the institution was a public or a private space and, thus, whether or not it fell within the proper domain of ladies. When the narrator of ‘Recollections of a London Workhouse’ renewed her attempts to pay visits to the children and the sick inmates by meeting with the chairman of the board of guardians, she was met with disparagement because of her sex. The chairman replied ‘[w]hy, what could you do in the workhouse? Managing it is like governing a city. *Men* can hardly do it, but ladies know nothing about such places, and had better keep out of them’.¹⁰⁶ The chairman’s words construct the workhouse as a public domain that was the concern of men alone. It was not until 1854 when the workhouse board of guardians was replaced by different men that the narrator was finally allowed to visit the inmates.

By contrast to chairman’s representation of the workhouse as a ‘city’, or the construction of the space as a dangerous wilderness in some investigative journalism, advocates of workhouse visiting sought instead to construct the workhouse as a home. In 1857, correspondence printed in the ‘Home’ column of the *National Magazine* drew attention to ‘a new work for the good of suffering humanity’.¹⁰⁷ The writer of this letter described how a group of respectable ladies had formed a committee and were regularly visiting the inmates of their local workhouse. The publication of this correspondence in the ‘Home’ column situates the workhouse within a discourse of domesticity. The letter entreats readers to

¹⁰⁶ De Morgan, ‘Recollections of a London Workhouse’, p. 51.

¹⁰⁷ S. P., ‘Correspondence’, *National Magazine*, March 1857, pp. 334-335 (p. 334).

‘imagine the blessing to the poor sufferers from sickness, poverty, insanity, and old age, of thus receiving sympathy and kindness from those willing and able to give them help and comfort’.¹⁰⁸ This emphasis upon ‘sympathy’, ‘kindness’ and ‘comfort’ proffered by lady visitors represents the workhouse as a space desperately in need of these feminine attentions.¹⁰⁹

These feminine qualities are depicted in the sentimental poem ‘A Visit to the Workhouse’ (1861), also published in the *National Magazine*. In this poem, a lady’s visits to a workhouse are described in terms of casting warmth and light upon the paupers: her face is ‘[t]he one bright thing that brightens all the days/ [u]ntil she comes again’.¹¹⁰ The lady visitor brings joy to the elderly, comfort to the sick and dying, and brightness to the lives of the little children. The sense of the celestial is suggested by her representation as a disembodied figure in the poem; known only by the name ‘the lady’, the textual descriptions are limited to her slender fingers, smiling face, ‘low, soft voice’ and ‘aching heart’, as well as the fact that she is ‘gently born’.¹¹¹ An archetype of well-bred femininity, she enacts here the role of angel in the (work)house.

Contemporary accounts of district visiting draw attention to the scrutiny given to the clothing worn by the visitors; plain, dark clothing was generally favoured so as to allow these individuals to be less conspicuous in the slums and to avoid accentuating the class divide between themselves and their poor neighbours.¹¹² However, in the article ‘Gertrude’ (1883), published in *Leisure Hour*, the narrator describes how her sympathetic friend, Gertrude,

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ As Gerard has pointed out, ‘[i]n the cult of True Womanhood [...] women were considered morally superior to men, more sensitive, emotional, and intuitive [...]. Their philanthropy was justified as an extension of these domestic roles’. See Gerard, ‘Lady Bountiful’, p. 189.

¹¹⁰ M. E. G., ‘A Visit to the Workhouse’, *National Magazine*, October 1861, pp. 316-319 (p. 316).

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 319.

¹¹² Ross points out that ‘[w]omen doing serious social work wore their skirts on the short side and chose dark colours, washable fabrics, and simple styles. [...] More casual visitors displayed their amateurishness by dressing in high-fashion clothing’. Ironically, Ross suggests that these dark clothes often made visitors more conspicuous amongst the poor, as the factory girls were ‘often clad in vivid scarlets, blues, or greens thanks to cheap and effective new aniline dyes’. See Ross, *Slum Travelers*, p. 17.

would go once a month to visit the workhouse paupers, dressed in her finest clothes. The unwritten dress code of the district and workhouse visitor is spectacularly flouted by Gertrude, whose simple logic is that poor people enjoy looking at finery; as she says, ‘poor people care much more to see one in one’s best things than rich people do. I wonder why everybody generally puts on their common dull old clothes when they visit cottages’.¹¹³ Thus, in preparation for visiting the workhouse, she bedecks herself in ‘as gay a plumage as any West Indian bird’ and ‘would put a diamond brooch in her hat, [...] fasten up the tail of her gown with some glittering shawlpin, and would wear gold chains, like an alderman, round her throat’.¹¹⁴ The narrative lingers indulgently on the richness of her dress and her ostentatious show of wealth is in stark contrast to the bare workhouse wards and the impoverished paupers.

While only a few lines of the narrative are given to Gertrude’s workhouse visit, it is this scene which the illustrator chooses to privilege in the accompanying illustration ‘At the Workhouse’ (fig. 1). The image gives visual expression to the textual description of Gertrude, surrounded by pauper women, waiting until ‘the whole circle had fingered the gay gown [and] feeling all the while as well pleased as any child could be to see how much her fine clothes were admired’.¹¹⁵ Though, in the text, the drably dressed matron is described as ‘deprecating’, in the image she is depicted looking on with an expression more of longing.¹¹⁶ The aged paupers are described in the text as sitting around a stove but, in the image, Gertrude replaces this as the source of light, sparkling in her diamonds and feathers; she is a spectacle of sympathetic and childish femininity in the workhouse, dripping tears and riches.

The function of workhouse visiting went far beyond merely offering sympathy to the paupers. Numerous articles asserted the necessity of respectable women becoming involved

¹¹³ Anne Fellowes, ‘Gertrude’, *Leisure Hour*, January 1883, pp. 24- 26 (p. 26).

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

in the management and care of the paupers.¹¹⁷ An article in the second issue of the *Journal of the Workhouse Visiting Society*, entitled ‘A Plea for Workhouse Visitors’, draws attention to institutional failings, referring, in particular, to the case of a 16-year-old invalid girl permanently confined to a ward with no occupation or amusement. The article is carefully diplomatic and states that ‘[w]e do not say that Guardians are to blame for the cases of forlorn and dreary existence. They are busy men, whose thoughts and time are fully occupied with the hard and dry matters of routine and expenditure’.¹¹⁸ Asserting that the workhouse ‘machinery’ is desperately in need of ‘other influences’, the text makes the point that the conditions in these institutions would be vastly improved if ‘women are only allowed to perform that part which in all the household and domestic relations of life has ever been assigned to them’.¹¹⁹ The masculine term ‘machinery’, used to describe the workhouse, implicitly suggests that the failings of the institution are due to male-dominated rule. Similarly, the narrator of ‘Recollections of a London Workhouse’ compares the successful management of a private home to the management of a workhouse and alleges that ‘[a]ll [public institutions] require the influence of women, both directly and indirectly exercised, and the absence of that influence is in nothing more apparent than in the abuses and disorders which are the cause of so much suffering and waste in a large London workhouse’.¹²⁰ The narrator implicitly heaps blame for human suffering upon the decisions of men unqualified to fulfil the duties that should rightly be performed by a woman. Suggesting that the workhouse is an extension of the domestic home, these articles make the point that it is women, not men, who possess the homemaking skills needed to care for the children, the sick and the elderly.

Despite possible accusations of interference, workhouse visiting was nevertheless advocated by many texts as a social duty for women. If, as Anne Summers points out,

¹¹⁷ Summers points out that ‘[t]he work of visiting [...] exercised significant political and social pressure on the direction and administration of official policies towards the poor’. See Summers, ‘A Home from Home’, p. 33.

¹¹⁸ ‘A Plea for Workhouse Visitors’, *Journal of the Workhouse Visiting Society*, II (1859), 51-53 (p. 53).

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

¹²⁰ Morgan, ‘Recollections of a London Workhouse’, p. 49.

‘[v]isiting the poor was a practice in part intended to transpose the values of the visitor’s home to the working-class environment’, then workhouse visiting was a similarly ideological exercise.¹²¹ The Reverend J. S. Brewer’s address on workhouse visiting (1855) encourages women to view workhouse visiting as a way in which to play a part in the improvement of society. The lecture asserts that the bourgeois domestic home is ‘the very marrow of our national life’ and therefore the starting point for the reform of the undomesticated poor.¹²² Addressing women, the lecture claims that, ‘unwittingly, you are exercising in your own families a vast social and political power; you are educating the poor under you [...] and instructing them in the most powerful, because the most unpretending way, in all that you yourselves know and practise’.¹²³ Whereas female servants emulate the behaviour of former mistresses when they leave employment to set up their own homes, those who have had no opportunity to observe the housekeeping skills of the middle-class homemaker are deprived of the example of economical prudence needed to keep their families out of the workhouse.¹²⁴ High levels of pauperism are thus blamed upon the increasing physical distance between the poor and their respectable employers and the subsequent breakdown of this system of education and emulation.¹²⁵ In light of this assertion, the lecture insists to would-be visitors that, in the workhouses, it is ‘as ladies, that you will effect the greatest amount of good’: [t]he inmates ‘would see what they never see now – meekness, gentleness, and purity presented to

¹²¹ Summers, ‘A Home from Home’, p. 57.

¹²² Rev. J. S. Brewer, Lecture XI, ‘Workhouse Visiting’, in *Lectures to Ladies on Practical Subjects* (Cambridge: Macmillan and Co, 1855), pp. 262-283 (p. 277).

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 274. Summers points out that ‘[r]elationships within the household offered a model for relations between rich and poor outside it: a model of the working class as economically and socially dependent, obedient, disciplined, clean and broken in to the daily methods and routines of the middle-class family unit’. See Summers, ‘A Home from Home’, p. 39.

¹²⁴ Gerard notes that ‘[m]iddle- and upper-class women were [...] assumed to have superior manners and taste and better methods of household management and childrearing which they could impart to their inferiors through influence’. See Gerard, ‘Lady Bountiful’, p. 190.

¹²⁵ Summers explains that a sense of social distance between classes became more acute in the nineteenth century as middle-class employers moved their residential homes away from their place of work and into the suburbs. See Summers, ‘A Home from Home’, pp. 36-37.

themselves in a shape, not of dry instruction, but of a living woman'.¹²⁶ The lecture constructs the lady visitor as a didactic domestic angel, whose presence brings into the institution all the values of the middle-class home and provides an example for the paupers to model themselves upon. His words draw attention to the representation of the lady visitor as a vehicle for promoting the values of the bourgeoisie and implicitly politicises the practice of workhouse visiting.

As well as promulgating the political ideologies of workhouse visiting, Brewer's lecture also calls attention to the advantages of this type of visiting over district visiting; in the slum home, the squalid and overcrowded housing conditions potentially posed risks to the health and modesty of the district visitor and, as Summers points out, '[n]ot every well-meaning woman was capable of entering the wretched tenement or hovel of a total stranger'.¹²⁷ The drawbacks of district visiting were eliminated in the case of workhouse visiting: the scrupulous cleaning regime protected the lady's health, the strict separation of the sexes protected her modesty, and the paupers had no claims to a private space from which they could exclude a visitor. According to Brewer's lecture, further important benefits are that,

[h]aving no occupations and allowed to exercise none, [...the inmates...] are in a more suitable frame of mind to listen to you, more thankful for your attentions, [and] more ready to confide in you [...]. They are, moreover, almost entirely isolated from the rest of the world.¹²⁸

The lecture suggests that workhouse paupers, starved of friendship and comfort, are effectively sitting targets for zealous visitors and their improving influence. Moreover, any beneficial effect that these visits might have would not be counteracted by worldly corruptions such as drinking or gambling. Unlike slum dwellers, who might have shown resistance or open hostility to advice proffered from visitors, workhouse inmates were a

¹²⁶ Brewer, 'Workhouse Visiting', pp. 281, 283.

¹²⁷ Summers, 'A Home from Home', p. 42.

¹²⁸ Brewer, 'Workhouse Visiting', p. 264.

captive audience with nothing better to do than listen and be grateful.¹²⁹ Workhouse visiting was thus ideal as a way for women to access the poor and to exert their influence over them.

Articles in magazines similarly placed onus on female readers to become proactive in improving the conditions of the workhouses. Addressing the female readers of the *English Woman's Domestic Magazine*, the narrator of 'The Englishwoman in London' lays forty to one odds that 'within the [workhouse] walls all is *terra incognita* to you' and, overtly critical of this apathy towards the workhouse, directly asks the reader to consider 'how much of [the] disorder [...] is owing to your absence?'¹³⁰ The text implies that it is the moral duty of women to bestow their feminine influence on the workhouses and employ their natural skills at household management. The narrative equates the workhouse to a domestic home from which women's absence is thus a form of social transgression. In an echo of Brewer's lecture, the narrator asserts that 'the actual presence of a Christian woman among the morally or physically sick carries with it a weight and a worth that no gold can purchase'.¹³¹

Summers argues that '[v]isiting the poor [...] gave women a taste of power outside their own homes'.¹³² Though district visitors may have wielded more ostensible power over the lives of the poor than workhouse visitors (they could, for example, distribute or withhold gifts depending on how clean the home was or whether the children had attended school), accounts of workhouse visiting draw attention to the power that the lady visitor exercised over the morals, convictions and behaviour of the female paupers. In *Sunshine in the Workhouse* (1858), Emma Sheppard recounts her experiences of becoming a friend to the

¹²⁹ Hewitt notes some of the responses that missionaries received when visiting the poor to distribute tracts: '[a]ccounts talk of visitors being threatened with axes, pots or any household utensils to hand, of having dirty water or worse emptied on them as they climbed the stairs'. See Hewitt, 'District Visiting', p. 133. In *Sunshine in the Workhouse* (1858), Emma Sheppard draws attention to the far warmer greeting given to workhouse visitors: '[in the workhouse,] [t]he extreme cordiality, the earnest pleasure at seeing me, the intense desire to see me again, were so different from the welcome one gets, even in the cottages of those one ordinarily visits.' Mrs G. W. Sheppard, *Sunshine in the Workhouse* (1858; London: Nisbet & co, no date), p. 6.

¹³⁰ M. S. R., 'The Englishwoman in London', *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, [no date], pp. 176-179 (pp. 176-177).

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

¹³² Summers, 'A Home from Home', p. 45.

paupers and the tangible evidence of her influence over them: '[t]hey used to consult me on all points, bringing their joys, sorrows, and disputings to me, always seeming to rest in my judgement'.¹³³ This lady visitor seems implicitly to enjoy the sense of her own importance in the eyes of the paupers.¹³⁴ As noted in chapter one, Sheppard's narrative suggests the cleansing moral effects that her visits had over the fallen women in the foul ward; Sheppard describes how she would read and pray with the grateful women and how, as a result of her attentions, many of these women resolved 'never to sin again'.¹³⁵

Not just concerned with inculcating her own values in the paupers through her friendly acquaintances with them, Sheppard also makes practical suggestions for improving the treatment of the poor. She suggests the effect that simple things, such as replacing the tin mug used for drinking tea with a cup and saucer, would have upon the comfort and dignity of the aged. As well as these small amendments, Sheppard describes how she has implemented her own cottage home system in order to take deserving paupers out of the workhouse; she also emphasises the need for a reformatory to help prevent fallen women from going back to prostitution when they leave the workhouse. As she points out, 'I do not feel as if I were stepping out of my own feminine position in thus suggesting certain reforms, for all know

¹³³ Sheppard, *Sunshine in the Workhouse*, p. 9. Sheppard explains that her first pamphlet, *Experiences of a Workhouse Visitor*, was originally intended to be circulated privately, but that demand for it was such that four new editions were published in rapid succession. Due to the unexpected popularity of this pamphlet, she decided to rework it into 'the more taking form' of a book. See Sheppard, 'Preface' to first edition, *Sunshine in the Workhouse*, p. v. In 'The Duty of Workhouse Visiting', Twining points out that ladies, who have the flexibility to make regular visits to the workhouse, could have a 'continued influence' over paupers. [Twining], 'Duty of Workhouse Visiting', p. 262.

¹³⁴ Considering the restriction of landed women's lives, Gerard points out that '[w]omen of intelligence, energy, and initiative, those with a thirst for power, found in philanthropy a socially approved outlet for their talents and needs'. See Gerard, 'Lady Bountiful', p. 206.

¹³⁵ Sheppard, *Sunshine in the Workhouse*, p. 36. A letter by another visitor, published in *Sunshine in the Workhouse*, points out that, since she began visiting the refractory girls in another workhouse, 'the Board has only had one case of insubordination brought before it'. *Ibid.*, p. 42. It seems that the lady visitor acts as a disciplinary figure in the house, policing the girls' morals and behaviour. In 'A Visit to a Workhouse', published in the *Friendly Companion* (1882), the representation of the fallen women is designed to impart a didactic message. On viewing the unmarried women with infants on a tour of the Brighton workhouse, the narrator exhorts '[s]hould any of our female readers be in places of temptation, we would entreat them to consider, apart from the sin and guilt, the probable and natural consequences of a loss of honour'. This direct caution to the female reader seeks to remind her of the chain of repercussions following such a 'loss of honour' that leads from pregnancy, to homelessness and, finally, to the workhouse ward. See 'A Visit to a Workhouse', *Friendly Companion*, 1 November 1882, pp. 252-255 (p. 252).

how superior are the comforts of the private house where a lady's influence exists, to that *ménage* which only boasts of bachelor rule'.¹³⁶ In this way, Sheppard employs the discourse of gender ideology in order to legitimise her presence and proactive involvement in the workhouse system. Far from representing the workhouse as a topographical public space that is outside the proper domain of women, workhouse visiting narratives naturalise women's presence within the workhouse.

As well as factual accounts, workhouse visiting was also represented in fiction. In the serialised narrative 'Workhouse Visiting' (1878), published in the *Monthly Packet*, a group of women take it in turns to relate their experiences of becoming workhouse visitors. Like the accounts discussed previously, these narratives seek to encourage other women to become workhouse visitors, but act to dispel the stereotype of the 'angel in the workhouse'. In chapter one of the series, Miss Meldon recalls how little attention she used to pay to the presence of her local workhouse:

though our workhouse is one of the most conspicuous buildings in the whole town, I lived for full half-a-dozen years in Ellsborough without bestowing as much as half-a-dozen thoughts upon it, [...and to me the paupers were...] shadowy indistinct beings that seemed to have as little to do with my own life as the inhabitants of Greenland or the interior of Africa.¹³⁷

By contrast to J. Irving Scott's lengthy contemplations of the workhouse and inmates, for the privileged and leisured Miss Meldon the workhouse exterior is a habitual sight that has become familiar enough to attain a kind of invisibility. Her construction of the faceless paupers here as 'shadowy indistinct beings', akin to a foreign race, recalls the representation of the inmates in 'A Walk in a Workhouse'. One day, Miss Meldon becomes 'haunted' by the sight of a destitute woman being committed into the workhouse who, 'as she passed through

¹³⁶ Sheppard, *Sunshine in the Workhouse*, p. 17.

¹³⁷ [Caroline M. Hallett?], 'Workhouse Visiting', *Monthly Packet*, 1 February 1878, pp. 164-177 (p. 166). Subsequent parts were published in July, August and September 1880.

the gate [...] cast one last glance at the outer world'.¹³⁸ The workhouse doorway becomes, to the narrator, representative of a threshold between the outside, known world and a mysterious, unfamiliar world inside the walls. In Miss Meldon's mind, the 'red pile [of bricks]' and the 'spotlessly white steps', are permeated with an eerie 'stillness' that borders on the supernatural.¹³⁹ Her decision to become a workhouse visitor is represented in the text as a quasi-gothic impulse to explore this unknown world; she is 'possessed' by a 'curiosity' that renders her 'more and more anxious to look inside those iron gates'.¹⁴⁰ The sudden, inexplicable desire to see inside the closed building draws attention to the workhouse as an uncanny site upon which ideas of the familiar and the unfamiliar converge.¹⁴¹

Miss Meldon's self-idealising belief that she will be 'a ministering angel to the workhouse' suggests that she anticipates exerting a domesticating influence over the workhouse, an assumption which is undermined by the subsequent narrative.¹⁴² That Miss Meldon sees herself as the natural superior of the poor is apparent in her confidence and self-aggrandizing approach to reading the homes of the poor; as her narrative states, '[c]lean window blinds and a few flowers on the sill are always good signs in my experience'.¹⁴³ While these 'signs' offer clues to the 'inner selves' of the residents, the workhouse, devoid of personal possessions and 'scrubbed up to the regulation standard of cleanliness', refuses such easy interpretation.¹⁴⁴ The workhouse interior inculcates a sense of self-doubt in Miss

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 166, 167.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 167.

¹⁴¹ Sigmund Freud defines the uncanny as 'that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar'. Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XVII (1917-1919), ed. James Strachey (1919; London: Hogarth Press, 1995), pp. 219-256 (p. 220). For an analysis of the uncanny in relation to buildings, see Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1992).

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 168. Elliott provides an analysis of women's charitable work and the domestic ideologies of the home. See Elliott, *The Angel Out of the House*, pp. 7-13.

¹⁴³ [Hallett], 'Workhouse Visiting', p. 176. For more information on the idea of reading the homes of the poor, see Ruth Livesey, 'Reading for Character: Women Social Reformers and Narratives of the Urban Poor in Late Victorian and Edwardian London', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 9:1 (2004), 43-67.

¹⁴⁴ [Hallett], 'Workhouse Visiting', p. 176. The gothic inflections of the narrative recall the accounts of investigative journalism discussed earlier. On Miss Meldon's first visit she is confronted by a 'large semicircle of figures, dressed exactly alike in blue gowns' and feels 'chilled' by the 'listless apathy' that 'enveloped the

Meldon who, far from being a ‘ministering angel’, has instead ‘a horrible self-conscious feeling of wondering what the other paupers must be thinking of [her]’.¹⁴⁵ Unable to interpret the workhouse as she would the tenements of the poor, this institution substitutes in Miss Meldon an uncomfortable uncertainty in place of middle-class confidence. Most unsettling about the workhouse in this text is this slippage of the interior between the usual and the strange. In the ‘sitting-room’ for the aged females there is a familiar sense of domesticity,¹⁴⁶ they cluster around the fire, sit sewing at tables, and are read to by Miss Meldon. The homeliness of the room is subverted, however, by Miss Meldon’s realisation that they were ‘making, as I found out afterwards, shrouds!’¹⁴⁷ A distorted version of a home, the workhouse interior disconcerts the middle-class visitor and frustrates her attempts to understand the space. The domestic ideology of the workhouse, promulgated in other accounts by lady visitors, is disrupted by the inherent otherness of the institution.

In a later chapter in the same series, workhouse visiting becomes a way for a bereaved woman to assuage her own guilt about her treatment of the poor. When Mrs Cardyce’s only child dies, she takes up workhouse visiting as a way to cope with her grief and to compensate for refusing to help a poor child who later died. This account aims to touch the consciences of readers and ask them to question whether they have anything that they could make amends for. Mrs Cardyce’s work as a friend to the pauper girls culminates in her establishment of the Girl’s Friendly Society; thus, the narrative demonstrates that workhouse visiting is the roots of greater political and social action.

room like a damp mist’. *Ibid.*, pp. 170-171. The identical appearance of the inmates is suggestive of an uncanny repetition and is interpreted by Miss Meldon through a gothic lens: the ‘damp mist’ which ‘chills’ her belongs to a romantic discourse of haunted houses and crumbling castles. Eerie semi-circles of paupers are also described in several visiting texts, including [Parkinson], ‘A Country Workhouse’, p. 18.

¹⁴⁵ [Hallett], ‘Workhouse Visiting’, p. 171.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.* The jarring of the domestic and the macabre is similarly apparent in ‘Recollections of a London Workhouse’, as the narrator recalls a ‘beautiful and light’ room complete with plants and a garden view. The room is pleasantly domestic, yet the task of shroud making performed in there is decidedly unhomey. Morgan, ‘Recollections of a London Workhouse’, p. 57.

Performing Benevolence

The benevolence of lady visitors, affluent members of the community and charitably-minded workhouse guardians to the paupers was frequently reported in newspapers and magazines.¹⁴⁸ These accounts of private charity were particularly prominent during the festive season when local residents provided trees, presents, decorations and entertainment to their local workhouses. Although the 1834 reform law had banned all festivities, following Queen Victoria's marriage to Prince Albert in 1840 the mania for Christmas became such that the Poor Law Commissioners allowed workhouses to accept private charity and, later, to provide treats out of the rates if they wished.¹⁴⁹ As Norman Longmate notes, 'Christmas by mid century was being celebrated at many workhouses as an Open Day on which leading local residents paid a formal visit to the paupers in their care'.¹⁵⁰ The decision to allow Christmas charity provided the philanthropic wealthy with a chance to demonstrate their generosity and to witness the effect of their benevolence upon grateful recipients.¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁸ Norman McCord notes that '[e]specially in the latter part of the nineteenth century it became common for charitable individuals, or groups of individuals, to provide amenities of various kinds for the inhabitants of Poor Law workhouses. These could include gifts of pictures, books, musical instruments or, for instance, a barrel of beer at Christmas time.' See Norman McCord, 'The Poor Law and Philanthropy', in *The New Poor Law in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Derek Fraser (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1976), pp. 87-110 (p. 103).

¹⁴⁹ For a history of the workhouse Christmas, see Longmate, *The Workhouse*, pp. 221-231. In *The General Orders of the Poor Law Commissioners* (1847), article 107, under the section 'Discipline and Diet of the Paupers', stipulates that the paupers must not consume anything above that set out in the dietary table, with the exception of on Christmas day, or medical recommendation. A footnote to this section notes that, '[i]t will be seen here that the Commissioners have here removed the difficulty which has heretofore existed in regard to the extra allowances for the dinners on Christmas-day which many Boards of Guardians desired to give to pauper inmates of the workhouse'. William Golden Lumley, *The General Orders of the Poor Law Commissioners* (London: Charles Knight, 1847), p. 174. Details of the extra allowances given to paupers were often reported in the press. See, for example, 'Christmas-Day in the Workhouses', *The Times*, 27 December 1869, p. 9, or, 'Christmas under the Poor Law', *The Times*, 26 December 1871, p. 8.

¹⁵⁰ Longmate, *The Workhouse*, p. 222.

¹⁵¹ Tara Moore points out that, 'while Christmas served as a liminal space in which charity gained heightened status, guardians encouraged a tourist approach to class-based goodwill by opening union doors for voyeurs seeking the spectacle of benevolence and gratitude'. See Tara Moore, *Victorian Christmas in Print* (New York: Palgrave, 2009), p. 72. Brewer's lecture on workhouse visiting suggests the idea of the workhouse being used as a stage upon which middle-class outsiders reassure themselves of their benevolence: addressing would-be workhouse visitors, he points out that the paupers 'have been so long used as anvils for other people to hammer out their own goodness on, and are becoming so sensible to this truth, that the outspoken poor of the London workhouses, at least, would be some time before they were convinced of your sincerity.' Brewer, *Lectures to Ladies*, p. 278.

The tradition of workhouse charity is reflected in the numerous accounts of festivities provided by members of the public in seasonal publishing. These pleasing representations of bourgeois philanthropy ameliorate any threatening associations of the institution and feed into a charitable middle-class sense of self. Though, ostensibly, the gifts depicted are given freely from philanthropic well-wishers to the workhouse paupers, underlying ideas of power and control are complicit in these representations of private charity so publically given.¹⁵² As M. Mauss points out, '[t]o give is to show one's superiority, to show that one is something more and higher, that one is *magister*. To accept without returning or repaying more is to face subordination, to become a client and subservient, to become *minister*'.¹⁵³ The ideology of social discipline is implicit in representations of workhouse benevolence; at the same time as they emphasise the altruistic nature of the charity given, these texts simultaneously work to reinforce the divide between paupers and givers and suggest the desire to condition the poor into submissive recipients of bourgeois values.

Characteristic of this sentimental trend of representing charity in the workhouse is the chapter 'Christmas Day in the Workhouse' (1859), part of the 'Notes of a Union Chaplain' series in the *Sunday at Home*. Narrated by the chaplain, the text describes his pleasure at seeing the workhouse dining hall in its 'Christmas clothing' with 'beams [...] covered with evergreens, and large boughs of holly with its glittering berries'.¹⁵⁴ The 'clothing' that dresses up the workhouse is a public demonstration of philanthropy by a wealthy member of the community 'at whose expense the chief part of the decorations have been provided'.¹⁵⁵ The workhouse festive façade is thus reflective of a middle-class construction of Christmas

¹⁵² McCord points out that '[i]n some cases ostentatious charitable activity might be a means to social distinction, or to a form of social rivalry between members of the propertied classes. Involvement in ameliorative activities could be derived from more subtle motives, such as a desire to buy off potential unrest and disaffection.' See McCord, 'The Poor Law and Philanthropy', pp. 105-106.

¹⁵³ M. Mauss quoted in Howard Newby, 'The Deferential Dialectic', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 17:2 (1975), 139-164 (p. 161). Newby is discussed in Gerard, 'Lady Bountiful', p. 184.

¹⁵⁴ 'Notes of a Union Chaplain. Chapter X. Christmas Day in the Workhouse', *Sunday at Home*, 22 December 1859, pp. 801-804 (p. 803).

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

that has temporarily been applied to pauper space. The decorations are visualised in the accompanying wood engraving (fig. 2), which depicts pauper men, women and children crowded happily around a well-spread table. Later in the narrative, when more visitors arrive to admire the hall, the narrator comments that ‘indeed it is a Christmas sight worth seeing’.¹⁵⁶ The text has a comforting function and assuages any guilt the middle classes may feel about pauperism at other times of the year.

The aestheticisation of the workhouse in ‘Notes of a Union Chaplain’ is similarly apparent in the wood engraving ‘Sending Toys to Workhouse and Hospital Children’ (fig. 3, 1869), published in the *Children’s Friend*.¹⁵⁷ The engraving is the visual counterpart to the poem ‘Christmas Week: A Contrast, and a Seasonable Hint’ on the preceding page, which compares middle-class Christmas celebrations in the domestic home with bleaker imagery of a poor child lying in the workhouse sick ward. The speaker promulgates a message of middle-class Christian charity, urging young readers to visit those less fortunate than themselves and requesting that they ‘Go forth with gifts this week/ To cottage or sick ward’.¹⁵⁸ The hopeful effect of the text upon readers is visualised in ‘Sending Toys’, which appears to illustrate the text’s exhortation ‘Dear Children, go and look/ ’Mid your forgotten store;/ Search every nook for toy or book/ That you will need no more.’¹⁵⁹ True to the words of the poem, in this engraving a group of children and their smiling mother sort through a toy cupboard to find items to donate to workhouse infants. The comfortable middle-class interior, with the children’s pictures pinned upon the walls, is juxtaposed with the smaller illustration of the workhouse exterior, identifiable as such by the official signage ‘NOTICE UNION’. This second scene details the following stage of the children’s charity: visiting the workhouse

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁷ The pages of the evangelical magazine, the *Children’s Friend*, are filled with didactic tales about sinful children, pious deaths and Christian self-denial. The workhouse is mentioned regularly in the stories of poverty that it features.

¹⁵⁸ Richard Wilton, ‘Christmas Week’, *Children’s Friend*, 1 December 1869, p. 183.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

to deliver their old toys. The workhouse, a potentially disturbing institution, is rendered non-threatening by the depiction of the smiling porter, who greets the young visitors at the threshold of the workhouse. Framed with wreathes of festive holly and berries, these pictures suggest the aestheticisation of charity and the workhouse; the dominance of the middle-class domestic interior over the smaller image of the institutional exterior allays the harsh connotations of the workhouse.

Unlike 'Sending Toys', the illustration accompanying the narrative 'An Afternoon in a Workhouse' (fig. 4, 1870), published in *Chatterbox*, gives visual expression to workhouse children receiving the charity of visitors. The narrative is a supposedly factual account of a group of visitors' provision of sweets and a gypsy entertainer as a belated Christmas treat for the pauper children. The wood engraving suspends the harshness of workhouse life into a single moment of domestic enjoyment, depicting the children as angelic, smiling creatures with round faces and wide eyes, while the master is a paternal-looking figure standing protectively behind them.¹⁶⁰ The light from the window shines onto their faces, emphasising their delighted expressions and creating a sense of pathos around their childish innocence. The narrator herself is preoccupied with the pleasing appearance of the pauper children; to her, 'the boys in the dull brown workhouse clothes looked uninteresting enough, poor fellows; but the girls in clean blue frocks and pinafores, their hair nicely turned back and tied with a bit of ribbon, were prettier objects to look at'.¹⁶¹ The appeal of the infants is such that the visiting women 'want to adopt all these pretty children immediately' whose 'fair necks and round arms seem so fitted for delicate muslins and gay ribbons'.¹⁶² Their reaction echoes

¹⁶⁰ Similarly, in his discussion of the image of an impoverished crow-boy in the *Illustrated London News*, Peter Sinnema points out that 'everything "pleasing" about [the] text-image collaboration is dependent upon immobilization, on a suspension of the "story"'. See Peter W. Sinnema, *Dynamics of the Pictured Page: Representing the Nation in the Illustrated London News* (Aldershot; Brookfield, Vt Ashgate, 1998), p. 37.

¹⁶¹ H. A. F., 'An Afternoon in a Workhouse', *Chatterbox*, 16 November 1870, pp. 401-404 (p. 402).

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 403. Although H. A. F. points out that the workhouse children seem 'fitted for delicate muslins and gay ribbons' rather than the uniform of a pauper, a letter written by her to the editor of the *Monthly Packet* suggests that she is a firm believer in educating children to be content with their social station in life. In this letter she asks for advice regarding what books to provide young apprentices with and asks whether 'it is good

that of the visitor of ‘Convivial Pauperism’ who, at the sight of the little children, ‘impulsively offered to adopt the whole batch’.¹⁶³ This visitor’s spontaneous offer was qualified, however, to make the ‘trifling exception of eight or ten, whose phrenological development was so exceedingly “animal” that [his] timid nerves were on the rack’.¹⁶⁴ The superficial sentimentality of the narrator suggests that the visitors’ admiration of the children in ‘Afternoon’ is similarly based more upon the demonstration of sensibility than any serious intentions to provide for the children’s upbringing. Just as the monkey dances for the children, so too do the children dance for the visitors later in the text, suggesting, even if unintentionally, a similarity between the enslaved animal and the abandoned children; in this text, it seems that the philanthropic visitors are the real organ grinders of the workhouse.

As in ‘Sending Toys’ and ‘Afternoon’, the subject of Hubert Von Herkomer’s sentimental wood engraving ‘Christmas in a Workhouse’ (fig. 5, 1876), published in the *Graphic*, is middle-class philanthropy. The image depicts a hunched pauper woman, aided by a younger assistant, receiving her annual gift of tea from a charitable lady visitor. The viewer is positioned in the image as if seated by the side of the visitor and so drawn into the workhouse scene. Beneath the picture, a short poem reflects on the ‘desolation’ implicit in old age in the workhouse, but concludes with a festive representation of middle-class generosity:

Most days are sad, but not quite all,
 For even the cheerless Workhouse hall,
 When dawns the Christmas festival,
 Looks bright and pleasant;
 And then the kindly fairy’s last
 Best gift —the tea— in teapot cast,
 May bring to mind a far-off Past,
 A welcome Present!¹⁶⁵

to lift them out of their station with the medium of books’. Despite her charitable generosity to the poor, it is clear that this philanthropist does not advocate the relaxing of class boundaries. See ‘Dear Mr Editor’, *Monthly Packet*, 1 March 1865, p. 335.

¹⁶³ Pitt, ‘Convivial Pauperism’, p. 442.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ ‘Christmas in a Workhouse’, *Graphic Christmas Number*, 25 December 1876, p. 30.

The sentimental verses construct the visitor as a ‘kindly fairy’, recalling Miss Meldon’s idealistic desire to become a ‘ministering angel’ in ‘Workhouse Visiting’. While the pathos of poverty and the visitor’s kindness are the focus of the poem, in Herkomer’s picture it is the figure of the youthful pauper girl to whom the viewer’s eye is drawn. Centralised in the image, her simple workhouse garb represents a stark contrast to the fur coat, hat and earrings of the visitor, but the light shining on her face accentuates her beauty and gives her the air of a Pre-Raphaelite heroine. This idealisation of the impoverished girl ameliorates the harshness of the workhouse setting and renders the image an idealistic representation of poverty.

Although ‘Christmas in a Workhouse’ is, ostensibly, a celebration of middle-class benevolence, the overriding sentimentality of the scene is disrupted by a pervasive air of melancholy. In the background of the picture, festive garlands drape the windows and banners on the walls read ‘Merry Christmas’ and ‘God Bless our Master and Matron’, but these Christmas trappings recede into the gloom and fail to offset the bleakness of the workhouse interior.¹⁶⁶ Above the paupers’ heads, the high, barred windows look out onto a grey sky and reiterate the penal nature of the institution. The picture pays lip-service to Christmas cheer, but the workhouse hall is far from the ‘bright and pleasant’ environment promised in the poem. A sense of coercion is suggested by the positions of the old lady and her assistant: the young helper grasps the elderly pauper around the shoulders and, with her other hand, firmly holds the woman’s wrist so that her outstretched hand faces upwards in a deferential begging posture towards the visitor. Together, the figures form a tableau of giving and receiving. The arrangement of the visitor, assistant and old lady suggests that the image can also be read as a covert comment upon the staged nature of charity.

¹⁶⁶ Lee MacCormick Edwards points out the ambivalent nature of this sign, suggesting that it is either ‘intended by the artist to be read ironically or, conversely, to emphasize the notion of charity and “good works” so soothing to those Victorians largely isolated from the ghetto-like horror of London’s slums’. See Lee MacCormick Edwards, *Herkomer: A Victorian Artist* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), p. 76.

The sentimentality of this scene is rendered more equivocal by the publication of Herkomer's engraving opposite the image 'Returning Home with the Spoils' (fig. 6). In this picture, five richly dressed little girls sit worn out in a sumptuous carriage, surrounded by toys purchased on a Christmas shopping trip. When positioned opposite the stark poverty of the paupers, for whom Christmas day is marked only by sachets of tea, the extravagance of the affluent middle classes seems garish. The celebration of the visitor's charity in 'Christmas in a Workhouse' is subverted, albeit unintentionally, by the bourgeois excesses of 'Returning Home with the Spoils'.

Despite the sentimental representation of the workhouse in Christmas illustrations, these seemingly domestic images and the charity they depict are couched in politics of class, discipline and power. The short news article 'Christmas Entertainment at the Greenwich Union' (1864), published in the *Illustrated London News*, reports upon the 'liberality' of a woman, Mrs Angerstein, who arranged for 'eight magnificent Christmas trees', adorned with 'ornaments and useful articles', to be delivered to the workhouse as a treat.¹⁶⁷ Describing the hall as 'tastefully decorated with flags', this class-inflected narrative suggests the refined and cultivated qualities bestowed upon the workhouse by the middle-class benefactors.¹⁶⁸ On the preceding page, the wood engraving of the union hall (fig. 7), crowded with paupers, visitors and Christmas trees, is the visual complement to the textual explanation and purports to be a true representation of this news-worthy event. The Christmas trees on the right-hand side of the image dominate the scene and are adorned with lit candles, wooden horses, dolls, and boxes of tea and snuff. Identifiable on the tree are the flags of St George and the United Kingdom, and what appears to be the royal standard of England is draped to the left of the trees. These inscriptions of nationality on the workhouse imply the greatness of this

¹⁶⁷ 'Christmas Entertainment at the Greenwich Union', *Illustrated London News*, 16 January 1864, pp. 65-66 (p. 66). Sinnema analyses the political vision of the *Illustrated London News* in text and image. For more information, see Sinnema, *Dynamics of the Pictured Page*.

¹⁶⁸ 'Christmas Entertainment at the Greenwich Union', p. 66.

charitable country; they also suggest the security and safety of ‘Englishness’ brought in by the middle-class visitors in order to counteract the threatening otherness of the institution.¹⁶⁹ Clustered at the front of the image are the visitors and, while the paupers receive an address, these outsiders talk amongst themselves, admire the trees and make last-minute alterations to the branches. The reader of the *Illustrated London News* is aligned in this image with the visitors; viewers of this picture look directly at the turned backs of the guests, an arrangement which creates the sense of the viewer positioned amongst this crowd of visitors, interpreting the workhouse Christmas through their eyes. By contrast to the visual nearness of the visitors, the paupers are pictured only in a small triangle of space in the far left of the image, separated from their social superiors by a wooden barrier. The illustrator’s marginalising of the paupers suggests their passivity at this Christmas event and generates interest in the true subject of the image and text: the charitable middle-class visitors.

Although the decorated trees depicted in the *Illustrated London News* represent a pleasing display of charity, the later narrative ‘A Christmas Tree at a Workhouse’ (1881), published in the *Monthly Packet*, more overtly draws attention to the politics of class and gender implicit in scenes of festivity. Written as a guide for workhouse visitors, the text informs them of the practicalities involved in decorating a tree and draws attention to the need for careful regulation to avoid ‘creating jealousy or discontent’ amongst the paupers.¹⁷⁰ The comment that ‘[o]nly those who understand workhouse visiting will appreciate this last remark’ is an implicit nod to other visitors and suggests that the narrator is in dialogue with a readership who share values and pastimes.¹⁷¹ The visitor is preoccupied with achieving an artistic result and the need for thrift is carefully balanced with the desire for ornament; one tip is that pipes ‘look very pretty on the tree, and are so cheap that a few breakages do not

¹⁶⁹ Sinnema points out that ‘[t]he *ILN* makes the world, fabricating an English identity for its nineteenth-century readers, by contributing to such solidifying ideologies as those of national superiority, limitless technological progress, and bourgeois solidarity’. Sinnema, *Dynamics of the Pictured Page*, p. 31.

¹⁷⁰ ‘A Christmas Tree at a Workhouse’, *Monthly Packet*, 1 December 1881, pp. 609-612 (p. 609).

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

matter'.¹⁷² This attention to the decorative is suggestive of the aestheticisation of the workhouse in the *Illustrated London News* and elsewhere.

Social values very much inform the narrative, apparent in the familiar comment that, in the visitor's opinion, the 'most unsatisfactory class of all' is that of the 'women with babies'.¹⁷³ As Newby argues, 'charity has long been [...] an integral part of the legitimisation of social subordination, not only through its status-enhancing properties but because it has been used discriminatingly in favour of the "deserving" (i.e. deferential) poor'.¹⁷⁴ That paupers receive their gifts in order of how satisfactory they are as a class, suggests a similar kind of reward system based on gift giving; these girls are last in line to receive their gifts because they have proven themselves to be sexually incontinent. The visitor also includes the workhouse officials in the present-giving ceremony as, 'it seems to make us all one in the enjoyment of the treat (at least in idea)'.¹⁷⁵ This bracketed aside suggests that, far from attempting to temporarily break down any class boundaries, the distribution of gifts is designed to reinforce social divide and the superiority of the visitor. At the end of the narrative, the visitor recalls an instance when a young workhouse woman requested her assistance in the belief that, since 'I took so much trouble about the Christmas Tree, I should never mind the trouble in helping *her*'.¹⁷⁶ The pauper is now a 'useful servant' and the visitor concludes that 'she is not the first or only one who has learned a good lesson, and been the real fruit of my Christmas Tree'.¹⁷⁷ The idea of learning a 'lesson' associates the tree with a covert didactic purpose; it appears the 'real fruit' is the cultivation of a well-disciplined working class.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 610.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 609.

¹⁷⁴ Newby, 'The Deferential Dialectic', p. 161. Gerard discusses this idea in relation to the activities of charitable village women amongst the poor in their communities. See Gerard, 'Lady Bountiful', p. 184.

¹⁷⁵ 'A Christmas Tree at a Workhouse', p. 611.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 612.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

In 1865, the *Illustrated London News* published the engraving, ‘Christmas Entertainment to the Poor of the City of London Union’ (fig. 8), in which the bourgeois guests literally take centre stage. The image depicts a man and woman, professional vocalists, performing upon a stage that has been constructed in the workhouse dining hall. In front of the stage, a sea of pauper heads and bonnets blend together and, behind the paupers at the bottom of the image, the middle-class visitors stand or sit. The viewer is positioned at the back of the hall with the visitors, looking onto the performance as if from a theatre box. As in the previous engraving, it is the visitors who attract the viewer’s interest: while the paupers are indistinguishable from one another, the visitors mill around in their finery, chatting, drinking wine and watching the professional performers. For these visitors, the evening is a doubly ‘social’ event: they socialise with one another and, at the same time, are representative of a charitable social cause.¹⁷⁸

The accompanying news report describes for the reader the transformation of the workhouse dining hall, which is now ‘adorned with festoons of evergreens and with a series of landscape-pictures, executed by an inmate of the workhouse’.¹⁷⁹ The writer’s own social outlook on poverty is revealed in his passing comment that this ‘artistic skill might have preserved [...the inmate...], one would have thought, from pauperism’.¹⁸⁰ This implicitly admonitory remark about the failure of the pauper again assumes a readership that shares the same world view about indigence and the poor.¹⁸¹ By contrast to the Christmas domesticity represented in ‘Notes of a Union Chaplain’, the disciplinary structures of this workhouse are not relaxed in honour of the entertainment. Although the scene is a familial one for the

¹⁷⁸ For an analysis of the term ‘social’ in the nineteenth century, see Elliott, *The Angel out of the House*, pp. 113-114.

¹⁷⁹ ‘Christmas Entertainment to the Poor of the City of London Union’, *Illustrated London News*, 21 January 1865, pp. 51-52 (p. 51).

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁸¹ As Sinnema points out, ‘the *ILN* in its early years exhibits a rather equivocal disposition toward the indigent and less privileged members of society. This, in spite of the newspaper’s early claim “to represent” the people and to stand on the side of the poor.’ See Sinnema, *Dynamics of the Pictured Page*, p. 41.

visitors, it is not so for the paupers: while visiting men, women and children hobnob at the back of the room, the strict division of the sexes remains for the paupers, with women seated to the left of the image and men to the right. In this image, as in the engraving of 1864, the *Illustrated London News* represents to the reader a comforting image of middle-class Christmas cheer, charity and, most importantly, well-disciplined paupers. The intentional viewer/ visitor alignment enables the reader to feel that, as members of the middle-class ranks, they too are vicariously part of the charity pictured.

Unlike the two previous engravings, ‘New-Year’s Eve at St Giles’s Workhouse’ (fig. 9, 1884) also published in the *Illustrated London News*, contains a sense of the carnivalesque. The image is intended to give visual expression to the charitable entertainment given to pauper inmates at a workhouse, but, rather than attempting to convey a realistic counterpart to the textual report, the engraving is made up of multiple tongue-in-cheek vignettes from throughout the evening. The fragmentation of the image allows it to represent a narrative of the entire night, rather than a single temporal moment. By contrast with the engravings of the City of London union and the Greenwich union, in this image the visitors are part of the entertainment provided for the paupers. The vignettes depict the individual performances of the guests who recite ballads, relate stories and play the piano for their workhouse audience. This doubling of the visitors as theatrical players suggests the convergence of charity and performance in ‘New-Year’s Eve’; the workhouse has become the literal stage of the philanthropic men and women who patronise it. Despite the sense of carnival implicit in the idea of the respectable middle classes enacting other identities, there remains in ‘New-Year’s Eve’, as in the earlier engravings of the *Illustrated London News*, a rigid delineation between paupers and visitors: the image can be split into two halves, with the middle-class guests pictured in the top half of the page and the pauper inmates and workhouse officials below them. This carefully delineated divide between outsiders and inmates results in a pleasingly

carnavalesque image that is still comfortingly structured along class lines. The illustrations of the visitors are ostensibly meant to represent the individuals named in the textual report. The picturing of these middle-class patrons within these workhouse scenes is a compliment to the philanthropy of the visitors; the engravings are at once testament to the political and social importance of these individuals and a means of further increasing it. Rather than conveying a true visual representation of ‘news’, the priority of these engravings seems to be to reflect back at the reader flattering ideas of middle-class generosity.

A similar message of benevolence is apparent in a watercolour by John Henry Buckingham, entitled *The Workhouse Treat* (fig. 10; no date). The image depicts paupers enjoying a meal under the cover of a marquee-like structure on a summer’s day. The scene is an attractive one: flowers are depicted upon the table; there is a dog sitting by the feet of a pauper, and well-dressed men and women, presumably guardians, visitors and patrons, mill around behind the eating paupers. In the right hand corner a well-dressed gentleman looks on smilingly at a feasting pauper boy. The focal point of the image is a sign attached to the pole that reads, ‘FRIENDS WE THANKYOU’. The sign is arranged in the image so that it seems implicitly to speak to the viewer of the painting, interpolating them as the friends deserving of gratitude who have helped to provide these festivities for the poor.

The covert social agenda of benevolence is most apparent in ‘A Workhouse Episode’ (1892), an illustrated third-person account of a visitor’s mission to provide a ‘huge strawberry feast’ in the workhouse.¹⁸² The visitor remains anonymous in the written text and is known only by the pseudonym of the ‘Workhouse Friend’, an absence of identity which cultivates an air of mystery around the ‘Friend’.¹⁸³ Taking advantage of rules that permit the giving of ‘wholesome’ fruit ‘under the supervision of the officials in charge’, the visitor, with the help of several officers, carries ‘enormous dishes, heaped up with ripe, fresh strawberries’ around

¹⁸² ‘A Workhouse Episode’, *Quiver*, January 1892, pp. 372-375 (p. 372).

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 372.

the workhouse wards for the delighted paupers.¹⁸⁴ The charity strawberries carry a religious message and encourage the sick to reflect that these fruits ‘are but the dim reflections of all that may await them in the fairer, brighter home beyond the grave’.¹⁸⁵ This ‘wholesome’ fruit suggests to paupers (and readers) that they should cast their minds away from worldly matters towards more spiritual affairs. A sentimental illustration in the article (fig. 11) depicts the ‘Friend’ proceeding through the aged women’s ward and gives visual expression to the description of the infirm old women raising ‘their grey heads from their pillows with exclamations of delight, and [stretching] out wrinkled hands to clutch eagerly at the “beautiful red berries”’.¹⁸⁶ The women receiving the strawberries are ‘like children in their glee’ and one crippled individual ‘laugh[s] like a happy child’ when he is fed by the visitor.¹⁸⁷ This infantilising of the paupers through their consumption of charity suggests the covert disciplinary effect of the Friend’s strawberries; the act of giving enforces deference and is an implicit form of social control.

The use of charity as a mechanism to enforce submission is evident in the representation of one pauper’s refusal to accept charity. Although he has helped to distribute the fruit, this man ‘damp[s] the pleasure’ of the ‘Friend’ by resisting all entreaties to himself partake of the treat.¹⁸⁸ For this refusal, the pauper is deemed a ‘recalcitrant inmate’ and is criminalised in the text for his constant rejection of all private charity.¹⁸⁹ While, in *Oliver Twist*, the request for more food is interpreted as a threat to the workhouse system, in this text it is rather the refusal to eat that is seen as an act of dissent. Forced to explain himself, the pauper reveals that he does not wish to be ‘beholden to [...others...] for so much as the value

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 372, 373.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 372.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 373.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 374.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

of a single strawberry' and asserts that 'pride was left to him'.¹⁹⁰ Suggestive of manliness, this 'pride' implies that the acceptance of the strawberries and the deference this acceptance entails would be akin to emasculation.

Although the gender of the 'Friend' remains ambiguous in the written text, the accompanying images depict the visitor as female. In the illustration 'I don't want it, and I won't have it' (fig. 12), the female Friend is standing over the pauper man, who sits dejectedly in a chair, his right hand feebly positioned so as to distance himself from the visitor. The more powerful stance of the socially-superior visitor, along with her urge in the text to 'penetrate' the mind of the pauper man, dissolves normative hierarchies of gender.¹⁹¹ In the final lines of the narrative, the temporary disruption of the relationship between giver and receiver is restored; the pauper is persuaded to relinquish his objection to accepting charity and concedes with an 'almost childlike smile' that, in future, he would 'very thankfully receive any strawberries'.¹⁹² Like the other paupers, he becomes infantilised when he accepts the visitor's charity. It seems that the visitor's strawberries act as a covert form of social discipline and map middle-class ideas about class, gender and religion onto the workhouse.

The more cynical interpretation of charity as a self-conscious display of middle-class power is vocalised in the pages of satirical periodicals. *Punch*, in particular, frequently commented upon workhouse Christmas celebrations and, as Tara Moore notes, 'led the way in identifying the workhouse as an ironically imperfect icon of mainstream Victorian Christmas practices'.¹⁹³ In the seasonal poem, 'Christmas Day in the Workhouses', *Punch* emphasises the miserliness lurking behind the show of Christmas charity:

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁹¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, p. 375.

¹⁹³ Moore, *Victorian Christmas*, p. 71. Moore notes that '[t]exts that explored the performance of the workhouse Christmas argued that, for the poor, the day did not signify the epitome of English charity; rather, it was only a once-a-year performance that underscored their status as social outcasts for the rest of the year'. *Ibid.*, p. 73.

'Tis as if a day of grace
 Shone upon the realms of woe
 And the wretched, for a space,
 Rested in the depths below,
 Comfort, for a while at least,
 Gleams behind the workhouse door:
 Christian England makes one feast,
 Just at Christmas, for the Poor.¹⁹⁴

Here, *Punch* draws attention to the hypocritical nature of a so-called 'Christian England' that feasts the poor in accordance with Christmas customs, but leaves them to suffer the rest of the year.¹⁹⁵ The parsimony of the nation is similarly played upon in 'Some Stereoscopic Views of Christmas' (1882), which appeared in *Funny Folks*. The short article is a fictional news item which purports to provide a view of Christmas from both the perspective of a bourgeois newspaper and a pauper inmate. The 'Bumbleboro' Gazette' lauds the 'seasonal generosity' of 'worthy' town residents who have treated the paupers to the 'princely gifts' of either an ounce of snuff or 'superior' tea.¹⁹⁶ The following section, subtitled 'Reality', is written as if in the voice of a pauper and represents a strikingly different interpretation of these charitable gestures. While the pauper accedes that, yes, they did receive some snuff, it was 'just enough to tickle our noses and shocking cheap and nasty stuff at that!'¹⁹⁷ Far from being grateful to the middle-class visitors, the pauper narrator says that 'to see 'em, that pompous old Mare and them Haldermen [*sic*] a-goin' round the workhuss to show theirselves! It most made us all sick'.¹⁹⁸ The text satirises the visitors' parade as an egotistical display of power.

Attributing their cheers to the fact that 'the Master 'ad 'is hi on us', the pauper implies that

¹⁹⁴ 'Christmas Day in the Workhouses', *Punch*, 26 December 1863, p. 257. A poem published the following year makes a similar statement about the workhouse, pointing out that, at this time of year, 'workhouse tables groan, that groan,/[a]llas! but "once a-year"'. See 'King Christmas Discourses the New Year', *Punch*, 2 January 1864, p. 4.

¹⁹⁵ Tara Moore has also made this point. See Tara Moore, 'Starvation in Victorian Christmas Fiction', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 36 (2008), 489-505 (p. 495).

¹⁹⁶ 'Some Stereoscopic Views of Christmas', *Funny Folks*, 30 December 1882, p. 411.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

the inmates are coerced into a display of gratitude for the visitors and subverts the descriptions of cheering paupers in the *Illustrated London News* and elsewhere.¹⁹⁹

This self-centred charity is most famously satirised in George R. Sims's poem, 'In the Workhouse: Christmas Day' (1903), in which visitors arrive at the institution 'To be hosts at the workhouse banquet/ They've paid for — with the rates'.²⁰⁰ The show of bourgeois philanthropy is subverted by a pauper's assertion that he will 'eat not the food of villains/ Whose hands are foul and red'.²⁰¹ Attributing the death of his wife to the miserly refusal of the guardians to grant out-door relief, the pauper's accusation draws attention to the hypocritical nature of a society that will indulge the paupers in honour of Christmas but allow them to starve the rest of the year.²⁰² These satirical texts subvert the idea of the philanthropic visitor and, more generally, the trend for bourgeois representations of workhouse benevolence.

Workhouse visiting narratives, from investigative accounts to yuletide illustrations, all attempt some form of mastery over the workhouse. Investigative journalism seeks to uncover the hidden corners of the workhouse space and to strip the workhouse of secrecy. At the same time as they attempt to familiarise readers with workhouses, however, these narratives simultaneously attribute uncanny characteristics to the building and employ a discourse of sensationalism, frustrating their own attempts to understand it. Unlike the workhouse tourist,

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁰ George R. Sims, 'In the Workhouse: Christmas Day', in George R. Sims, *The Dagonet and Other Poems* (Toronto: The Mussen Book Co., no date), pp. 8-15, ll. 15-16.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*, ll. 39-40.

²⁰² Moore notes that '[w]hen poets and satirists gave the poor any type of agency, they showed the poor rejecting rather than embracing the supposedly inclusive net of holiday custom'. Moore, *Victorian Christmas*, p. 73. In 'Convivial Pauperism', the festivity of providing Christmas meals is horribly undercut by the visitor's exchange with the workhouse doctor: 'I encountered a doctor in one of the wards, and asked him how many of the inmates would die in consequence of overfeeding. "We generally have a heavy bill of mortality Christmas week," was his arch answer.' Pitt, 'Convivial Pauperism', p. 436.

representations of lady visitors in the workhouse suggest that this practice offered women an opportunity to exert their power over the space. The notion of social control that is implicit in the practice of workhouse visiting is more explicit still in the representations of bourgeois charity. These idealistic images of feasting paupers, smiling children and generous visitors promulgate to readers a comforting vision of philanthropy that they can vicariously take part in. Far from merely advocating simple messages of charity, these representations of the workhouse are platforms for the political ideologies and social aspirations of visitors, and the meanings shift according to the agenda of the writer and illustrator. Despite their differences, all the narratives considered in this chapter reveal a middle-class experience of the workhouse and provide an insight into how the reading public thought about workhouses.

Chapter 4

The Politics of Vision

The previous chapters have explored the various accounts of the inmates, authorities and visitors who passed through the workhouse walls. The majority of the accounts discussed thus far have taken the form of written narratives which use language to shape the reader's impression of the workhouse. The discussions and debates about the workhouse, however, were far from being confined to exploration by the written word alone. Rapid advances in printing technology meant that images could now be cheaply reproduced and distributed. Perhaps the most important of these advances was the development of wood-engraving technology, which made it possible for text and image to be printed together on the same page at the same time. Illustrated magazines, newspapers and journals, which catered for all levels of the social strata, ensured that images became an inherent part of day-to-day life in the nineteenth century.¹ The illustrations that adorned the periodicals were not included merely for decorative value; while in some instances images enforce, or add impact to, the message of the text, at other moments they appear to work more subversively to add new meanings or to undermine and subtly alter those generated by the words.²

Given this new visual climate, it is not surprising that images are fundamental to the overall representation of the workhouse in the nineteenth century. Many textual accounts of the workhouse, particularly those published in the periodical press for a mass audience, appeared with pictures. Rather than being of secondary importance to the text, illustrations were often accorded a status on a par with the written word itself. In a world before cinema, the illustrations were, for some readers, no doubt more important and entertaining than the

¹ Kate Flint explores ideas of sight and vision in nineteenth-century culture. See Kate Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

² For discussion of word and image, see Julia Thomas, *Pictorial Victorians: The Inscription of Values in Word and Image* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2004).

written narrative. In some instances, visual representations of the workhouse appeared alone, with no clearly identifiable corresponding written article, or else with only a few loosely-related lines published several pages further into the publication.

The workhouse building itself was ingrained with ideas of vision. It acted as a visual icon that conveyed a didactic reminder about the consequences of idleness and improvidence. Not only this, but the power structures of the workhouse hinged upon sight. The panopticon-inspired workhouse designs sought to condition paupers into obedience by instilling in them a sense of the ever-watchful gaze of the workhouse master. At the same time as they were subjected to this gaze, whether real or imagined, the workhouse building conspired to limit the paupers' own gaze out of the workhouse grounds. There is something implicitly uncomfortable about the reproduction of workhouse pictures for the public gaze, when those inside were blinded from the outside world. Nevertheless, it is this inherent emphasis upon visibility that, I suggest, makes the workhouse both a particularly suitable, and inherently problematic, subject for pictorial representation.

The politics of looking are nowhere more obvious than in the wood engraving '*Couleur de Rose! Or, Fancy and Fact*' (fig. 1, 1867) and its accompanying article of the same title, published in the *Tomahawk: A Saturday Journal of Satire*. The status accorded to images is particularly evident when examining the relationship between '*Couleur de Rose*' and the corresponding written text. Though the text appears on the preceding page to the image, the opening sentences of the article, '[a] picture did you say? Let us put on our spectacles and pass judgement', immediately direct the reader's attention to the picture.³ The image depicts a pair of spectacles in the lenses of which attractive scenes of workhouse life are played out. In the left lens, a sick pauper man is pictured in a comfortable bed, being tended to by a doctor and a young woman with a tray of medicine. In the right lens, paupers

³ '*Couleur de Rose! Or, Fancy and Fact*', *Tomahawk: A Saturday Journal of Satire*, 23 November 1867, pp. 292-296 (p. 292).

are depicted enjoying a hearty meal with plates of meat and tankards of beer. Prominent in this scene is a man carrying a plate of steaming roast meat. In contrast to these pleasant visions of workhouse life, are the black and white scenes of horrific suffering that frame the glasses, which work to elicit an emotional response from the viewer. These images depict a dishevelled lunatic tied up in a cell, men breaking stones, vagrants clamouring for rations, a violent attack upon a pauper, a destitute mother being moved on in the street by a policeman, and destitute figures huddling in the rain, hoping in vain for admission to the workhouse. In the bottom left corner, a prostrate woman is depicted in the agonies of death with her arms locked together in prayer.

The hyperbolic and satiric article acts as an explanation of the picture and attempts to mirror in written narrative the process of ‘reading’ the image. The text first describes the pleasant, ‘Elysium’-like scenes, exclaiming ‘[c]all this a workhouse? Tush! This is the poor man’s home’ and assures the reader that ‘[y]es, we are a great, good, Christian people’.⁴ The tone then abruptly shifts:

Self-deceiving fool – take off your lying glasses – quick, drop your fancies – let us come to facts.

Ah! now you can see things with your own eyes – see them as they are, and I promise you they are worth the looking at. Now then, for the plain raw truth, in black and white.⁵

The text reveals the ostensible pleasantness of the workhouse to be a rose-tinted ‘fancy’ that veils the ‘black and white’ facts. Here, truth is intrinsically associated with ideas of vision and references to glasses, spectacles, seeing, eyes and looking proliferate.

Far from merely enforcing the text’s emphasis on vision, the self-referential image adds an extra dimension to the textual narrative by its manipulation of the viewer’s gaze. The (literally) rose-tinted spectacles are located so as to give the impression that they are worn by a viewer of the picture and so render him or her acutely aware of being in the uneasy position

⁴ ‘*Couleur de Rose!*’, p. 292.

⁵ *Ibid.*

of a voyeur of human misery. A viewer thus directly enacts, and is implicated in, what the text deems the deliberate blindness of the public and the authorities towards workhouse abuses. As the picture implies, all the ‘facts’ of the workhouse are invisible to a deluded observer, who views the workhouse through ‘lying’ glasses, perhaps in an effort to assuage their own conscience about the treatment of the poor.⁶ The image thus exploits its visual form both in the emphasis placed upon horror and in the pictorial clues embedded in the scene; a careful viewer of the picture can discern the macabre figure of a skeleton looming behind the dying woman and obscured by the darkness of the print. In an image so self-conscious about the idea of viewing, this partially hidden detail suggests the layers of vision needed to fully ‘read’ the image. At the same time, the gothic melodrama of this pictorial detail throws into crisis the surrounding vignettes’ claim to realism.

The image draws upon the two major modes of representing the workhouse in the nineteenth century: as either draconian prison or domestic home. It points to the issues of fact and fiction implicit in all workhouse texts, whether visual or written, and unconsciously emphasises the instability of the workhouse in representation. The other images in this chapter are not as overt in their scrutiny of vision and truth as is *‘Couleur de Rose’*, but they all speak to the idea of the selective or distorted gaze that is raised by this image and the complex relationship between word and image. The chapter analyses a range of visual genres, including satirical prints and caricatures, architectural diagrams and easel paintings, and examines the multiple ways in which pictures of the workhouse interact with the written word to shape the ideological construction of the workhouse.

The visual dimensions of workhouse representations will be explored in four main sections. I will discuss the anti-Poor Law satires that proliferated in the 1830s and 40s, examining how these pictures sought to play up the horror and absurdity of the institution for

⁶ The image has implications for the narratives of workhouse charity, discussed in chapter three, revealing as it does the artificiality of pleasant representations of workhouse life.

political comment. I will then explore images of the workhouse exterior, specifically in terms of the blindness of the inmates. Ideas of vision become particularly problematic in the architectural drawings explored in the third section, which deliberately obscure the function of the workhouse, privileging middle-class figures in the street over paupers in the grounds. In the fourth section I select images that attempt realistically to depict paupers in the interior spaces of workhouses and consider how they seek to construct a more comforting representation of workhouse life for viewers.

The different sections seem to correspond loosely to various decades of the nineteenth century, with critical attacks particularly prominent in the 30s and 40s, the grand architectural images proliferating from the late 40s, and the interior images more common from the mid to late century. These sections may appear to indicate a temporal change in representations of the workhouse across the century, from a site of horror to a welfare institution, but this shift is far from clear cut. In fact, the different modes of representation explored overlap across the century and themes repeat themselves time and again. Despite the problems inherent in attempting to categorise representations within temporal boundaries, this chapter makes the case that some modes of representation are more prominent than others at particular moments in the century and groups them accordingly. Collectively, these images provide a distinct genre of representation and are a lens through which to re-evaluate the prominence and politics of the workhouse in the nineteenth-century imagination.

The 'Bastille' in Caricature

In the immediate aftermath of the passing of the New Poor Law, the union workhouses attained the sinister appellation of the 'Bastille'.⁷ The comparison of the workhouse to the notorious French prison was fuelled by the sensationalist anti-Poor Law writings that proliferated in the 1830s and 40s.⁸ These played upon the popular rumours that circulated about the workhouses and fed into the terror the institution provoked in the minds of the poor.⁹ Hatred of the New Poor Law by the working classes gained intensity from its association with the 1832 Anatomy Act, passed just two years earlier, which made the unclaimed bodies of the workhouse poor available to hospitals for dissection. As Ruth Richardson points out, 'the Anatomy Act seems to have been assimilated in radical political consciousness virtually as an appendage of the New Poor Law'.¹⁰ Anti-Poor Law protest also coincided with Chartism, which aimed to secure the right of all men to vote, and thus spoke to an audience caught up in the fight for political emancipation.¹¹ The melodrama that was an

⁷ Norman Longmate points out that "[t]he union house", "the union" or most commonly of all, "the house", was how the working class described it, or more ominously "the Bastille" or "old Basty". See Norman Longmate, *The Workhouse: A Social History* (London: Temple Smith, 1974), p. 13.

⁸ In particular, the *Book of the Bastiles* (1841), a compilation of hyperbolic newspaper excerpts about the inhumane treatment of paupers, sought to incite public condemnation of the workhouse. G. R. Wythen Baxter, *The Book of the Bastiles or, the History of the Working of the New Poor Law* (London: J. Stevens, 1841).

⁹ John Knott writes that '[r]umour and fear helped determine the texture and tone of the campaign of popular opposition to the 1834 Poor Law. They served as powerful reminders of the legislation's alleged intentions and provided the inspiration for the black humour which characterised so much anti-poor law propaganda'. See John Knott, *Popular Opposition to the 1834 Poor Law* (London and Sydney: Croom Helm, 1986), p. 225.

¹⁰ Ruth Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute* (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), p. 270. Richardson analyses the panic about dissection created amongst workhouse paupers. *Ibid.*, pp. 221-222. It was not just those who may have felt perilously close to this fate who objected to the Act; Helen MacDonald writes on the Anatomy Act in relation to the New Poor Law and quotes Lord Teynham's argument that the Anatomy Act would 'convert every workhouse keeper into a systematic trafficker in dead bodies'. See Helen MacDonald, 'Procuring Corpses: The English Anatomy Inspectorate, 1842-1858', *Medical History*, 53:3 (2009), 379-396 (p. 381).

¹¹ After the Reform Act of 1832, the right to vote was held only by approximately one in five men in Britain. Between 1838-1850, the Chartist movement campaigned, as part of its 'six-point charter', to give every man the right to vote, and was described by Thomas Carlyle as 'the bitter discontent grown fierce and mad'. Quotation and figures cited in Gregory Claeys (ed.), 'Introduction', in *The Chartist Movement in Britain, 1838-50*, vol. 1 (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2001), pp. xix-xxxvii (p. xix). Crowther notes that, particularly in the north of England, the Poor Law was very much connected to other political movements, including factory reform and Chartism. See M. A. Crowther, *The Workhouse System 1834-1929: The History of an English Social Institution* (Cambridge: Methuen, 1983), p. 47. Louis James writes on the importance of coffee houses, penny reading

intrinsic part of written protests about government institutions in the 1830s and 40s made the workhouse a subject particularly ripe for caricature; the anti-Poor Law movement seems to have been an inherently visual campaign, made possible by the burgeoning of the periodical press and the rise of wood-engraving technology.¹² Scathing written articles on the New Poor Law appeared in magazines and were published alongside satirical images that depicted the workhouse. These overtly political caricatures, which are constructed in the written text as physical attacks upon the Poor Law, both respond to, and incite, anti-workhouse feeling.¹³ Though exaggerated for comic effect, these images and texts often claim to be ‘true’ representations. Together, the illustrations explored in this section construct a representation of the workhouse as it was imagined by a politically minded and socially-aware public in the wake of the New Poor Law and against the turbulent political backdrop of Chartism.

Some of the earliest protests against the Poor Law appeared as prints to be sold individually in print shops. One such text, the satirical ‘Interior of an English Workhouse* under the New Poor Law Act’ (fig. 2; c. 1833-36) from C. J. Grant’s series *The Political Drama*, visualises the institutional abuses typically associated with the workhouse system in the popular imagination. The print depicts paupers handcuffed to the wall, weeping children picking oakum, adults beating hemp, and a workhouse official violently whipping a man. An asterisk in the title of the print informs viewers that ‘For workhouse read slave house’, indicating that the print is a vitriolic attack upon the inhumane treatment of the poor by an

rooms and working-class libraries in inaugurating a literate and politically-informed working-class, and notes that, ‘during the political agitation of the 1830s [...] [coffee houses] became centres for radical discussion’. See Louis James, *Fiction for the Working Man 1830-50: A Study of the Literature Produced for the Working Classes in Early Victorian Urban England* (Harmondsworth: Penguin University Books, 1974), p. 8.

¹² Sally Ledger points out that ‘[t]he bodiliness of the melodramatic mode – its reliance on physical gesture as well as on the spoken word – was well adapted to the contemporary onslaught against the 1834 legislation’. Sally Ledger, *Dickens and the Popular Radical Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 85.

¹³ Knott points out that [s]atire was one of the most potent weapons available to opponents of the New Poor Law and they used it to savage effect’. See Knott, *Popular Opposition*, p. 234. While George Cruikshank’s representation of the workhouse space in ‘Oliver asking for more’ in Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* remains one of the most enduring anti-Poor Law images of the nineteenth-century workhouse, this chapter will not focus on this image, nor on those by John Leech in *Jessie Phillips*, as they have been discussed in chapter two. As this chapter will show, both of these illustrated books were part of a larger movement to criticise the Poor Law.

institution that appropriates their bodies as if it owns them. Attacks on the workhouse in the aftermath of the New Poor Law were bound up with criticism of the social figureheads behind it. That the print is intended as a political criticism of the framers of the New Poor Law is indicated by the subtitle dedicating it to ‘two ugly old women, Mothers Brougham and Martineau’.¹⁴ The print heaps the blame for the pictured abuses upon these two public figures. The heavily ironic epithet, ‘Mother’, draws attention to the distinctly un-maternal nature of the new deterrent workhouse system.

As the title indicates, text and image are closely entwined in the print. Pictured in the image is a man with a raised baton in the act of refusing the poor admission to the workhouse; a written caption next to him reads ‘go and rob for your living’. The refusal of relief, and explicit instruction to go and ‘rob’, invokes the causal role of the workhouse institution in forcing criminality upon the hungry poor.¹⁵ In another vignette, those paupers deemed by the system to be ‘incorrigible’ are depicted hanging from the ceiling with weights attached to their feet. This written label invokes the vocabulary of sin and suggests an essential depravity in the nature of paupers. By aligning the language used to discuss pauperism with the melodramatic image of the paupers undergoing punishment, the text implicitly critiques the vocabulary of pauperism and the social ideology that poverty is always the fault of the individual. Other written labels that purport to be orders from the Poor Law Commissioners are interspersed throughout the image and work to shape the reader’s

¹⁴ Lord Chancellor Henry Brougham, a sponsor of the New Poor Law, commissioned Harriet Martineau to write the propagandist tales *Poor Laws and Paupers Illustrated*. For more information on this commission, see Gregory Vargo, ‘Contested Authority: Reform and Local Pressure in Harriet Martineau’s Poor Law Stories’, *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies*, 3:2 (2007).

¹⁵ The refusal of relief at the workhouse continued to be blamed for forcing the poor to turn to criminality well beyond the decades of the anti-Poor Law movement. In a letter to the editor of *The Times* in 1858, the writer reports that an applicant, refused out-door relief to support her children by the board of guardians of the High Wycombe Union, responded: ‘[t]hen, upon your heads be whatever I do to get my children bread’. See ‘Why not go to the Workhouse?’, *The Times*, 28 December 1858, p. 5. The poem ‘A Parochial Problem’ explicitly draws attention to the link between ‘the Workhouse gate’ and ‘the gallows tree’. In this text, a young man refused admission to the workhouse decides that ‘If I’m robbed by the world of my pauper’s right / I’ll steal it back ere I’ll starve tonight’. W. B. B. S., ‘A Parochial Problem’, *Tait’s Edinburgh Magazine*, February 1858, p. 114. He is hung at the end of the poem for murdering a traveller.

interpretation of the scene. One such notice, pictured on the workhouse wall, plays upon contemporary anxieties about the dissection of the deceased workhouse poor and states ‘[a]ll paupers who are disorderly will be knocked on the head and sent to the surgeons. By order of Government.’ The exaggerated statement infers the criminal intentions of a government institution that trades in the bodies of the poor.¹⁶ The image of a man pulling a cart is given significance by the written speech next to it:

What have you got in the truck, Joe? – The infant poor wot’s *died*, I’m going to take one to the hospital to sell to the surgeons, ve generally have such a load as this here once a week.

The speech reveals that, grotesquely, the nondescript cart contains the bodies of dead children about to be anatomised. A later print, ‘Effects of the New Bastardy Law’ (fig. 3), No. 60 in the same series, implicitly recalls this image of the cart on the way to the hospital. In this print, which comments on the Bastardy Clause, illegitimate infants are depicted being wheeled into the workhouse in an open barrow. Sally Ledger, writing about this print, points out that ‘[t]he pauper babies who are the “*fruits* of the new Bastardy Law” at a glance resemble cabbages or melons that have been harvested for human consumption’.¹⁷ The closed cart containing dead infants in ‘Interior’ is a macabre foreshadowing of the fate of the illegitimate children in ‘Effects’, whose bodies will become fodder for the anatomists.

Despite the abuses meted out to the poor, viewers are not invited to empathise with the paupers, who are grotesquely distorted in the image; their heads, which are skull-like in their crudeness, have a creepy, inhuman look that distances them from the real workhouse

¹⁶ Knott points out that ‘[a] belief that the aim of a workhouse was actually to kill off the paupers and make a profit by selling their bodies to the surgeons for dissection was a persistent fear of popular opponents of the New Poor Law’. See Knott, *Popular Opposition*, p. 232. In 1842, the *Satirist; or, the Censor of the Times* commented that, ‘[the dissection of the paupers] is carrying out their principle of poor-law administration to an extent not contemplated by the most rigid economist. A pauper is certainly a fine “subject” for the dissecting-knife. No superfluous fat is likely to present an obstacle to the student’. See ‘Dissection of Paupers’, *Satirist; or, the Censor of the Times*, 13 February 1842, p. 55. MacDonald also quotes from this article. See MacDonald, ‘Procuring Corpses’, p. 387.

¹⁷ Ledger, *Dickens*, p. 89. As Ledger points out in relation to ‘Effects’, ‘a cannibalism trope – the underbelly of untrammelled consumption – lurks [...] in the literature of the anti-Poor Law movement’. *Ibid.*

poor.¹⁸ These caricatured representations lessen the immediacy of the horrors and maintain a sense of distance between the viewer and the pauperism imagined in the image. Instead, the image elicits in the viewer a general sense of disgust, couched in humour, at the workhouse system. The print is a social commentary upon a violent institution that is perceived to punish poverty and promulgate criminality.

As one of the principal authors of the New Poor Law, Lord Brougham was villainised by numerous satirical caricatures in the popular press. While ‘Interior’ invokes a physically absent Brougham by dedicating the print to him, the satirical print ‘Poor Laws in England’ (fig. 4; 1836) in the series *Lloyd’s Political Jokes* gives Brougham direct visual expression. The print supposedly depicts a women’s ward within a union workhouse.¹⁹ In the right of the image, an evil-looking man with narrow eyes sneers as he uses a disproportionately large spoon to ladle gruel into the bowl of a pauper woman.²⁰ The bucket from which he ladles this mixture has the label ‘pigs [*sic*] gruel’ etched upon it, suggesting the Poor Law’s equation of the paupers with animals.²¹ Female paupers are depicted attempting to eat this concoction but, overcome by the putridity of the gruel, one woman vomits the mixture back onto the floor. The noxious smell of the gruel is suggested by the well-dressed man who stands behind the first man with a bottle of rose water pressed to his nose. The image pokes fun at the delicate sensibilities of a man who alleviates distasteful odours with rose water, yet does not balk at feeding the gruel to women.

¹⁸ The pauper boys in Cruikshank’s ‘Oliver asking for more’ are similarly grotesque. See figure 10 in chapter two.

¹⁹ The print is made up of two self-contained halves with separate titles. The left half of the print depicts the interior of a women’s workhouse ward, as discussed in the body of the text. The right half of the print is titled ‘No Poor Laws for Ireland’ and depicts Lord Russell attempting to introduce the New Poor Law into Ireland.

²⁰ The distorted sizes of the spoon and bowl are similarly apparent in Cruikshank’s ‘Oliver asking for more’. As Ledger has noted, ‘the nature of the workhouse “dietary” and the total food-deprivation endured by those paupers who refused to enter the so-called “poor law bastille” [*sic*] was one of the central preoccupations of the anti-Poor Law movement’. Ledger, *Dickens*, p. 82.

²¹ Richardson draws attention to the poor’s understanding that they were ‘regarded as bestial by their social superiors’. See Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*, p. 222.

The accompanying text box above the figures identifies the man serving the gruel as Lord Brougham and the man with the rose water as the Bishop of London. Part of the text reads, as if in Brougham's voice, 'ye may thank a kind paternal government for these comforts'. The ironic written text draws attention to the patently unkind treatment of the poor by the government figurehead in this image, and the claim to paternalism implicitly recalls the dedication of 'Interior' to 'Mothers Brougham and Martineau'. Referring to the separation of these women from their families, the text continues '[i]t's absolutely absurd for you to say that you can't live without their society; look at me for example; I abominate both women and children, and yet live happy (on my pension) besides, you see them every Sunday for UPWARDS of 5 minutes'. Text and image interact to construct Brougham as a fiendish figure and humorously imply sexual deviance in his 'abomination' of women. The other text box, as if in the Bishop of London's voice, encourages the women to remember that 'the more humble you live here on earth, the more enjoyment will there be for you in heaven'. The irony of his words is made more explicit by the scroll in Brougham's back pocket with the words 'increased retiring pension' written upon it. The print points to the absurdity of social figureheads who do not practise what they preach; subversive of state authorities, the image suggests that the state apparatuses of religion and politics conspire to keep the poor in poverty.

In the prints 'Interior' and 'Poor Laws in England', written text is included within the images in order to direct the satiric attack towards particular political figures. In 'A Retired Chancellor's Meal' (fig. 5; 1837) in the *London Dispatch*, text and image work together in a similar way, but the text is separate from the image rather than entwined within it. The text below the image informs readers that Lord Brougham has an "out door" pauper allowance of 5,000 l. a-year' that would support 1, 488 paupers in the workhouse for a year, and draws

attention to the implicit social injustice of this discrepancy.²² The image works to convey additional readings to a viewer. In the picture, a hideous-looking Brougham is depicted eating from a bowl full of miniature-sized paupers; one such pauper is skewered on Brougham's fork, and the legs and arms of another unfortunate pauper hang out of Brougham's mouth.²³ While the text implies that political bodies are growing fat by starving the bodies of the poor, the image translates the written comment upon the salary of the chancellor into a pictorial scene of cannibalism. The implicit message of the image is that, because the long-starved bodies of the poor are so insubstantial, Brougham will have to eat a lot of paupers to satiate his hunger. Both text and image criticise the social injustice in the disparity between Brougham's substantial allowance and the insubstantiality of the out-door relief allowed to paupers. Rather than merely acting as ornament, the illustration adds meanings to the narrative and is privileged in the newspaper: the image is positioned above the text and dominates over it, suggesting the greater emphasis placed upon the visual depiction than the written word.

Following the 1834 Poor Law Amendment Act, the popular penny magazine *Figaro in London* also launched a series of satirical visual attacks upon the workhouse system.²⁴ The caricatures, which appear on the front page, and the corresponding written articles, poke fun at the corrupt brutality of the New Poor Law. Attention is repeatedly drawn to the images by the written articles, which praise the illustrations for their skilful design and emotional affect. There is a sense in these articles that the visual text is conveying something that cannot be

²² 'A Retired Chancellor's Meal', *London Dispatch and People's Political and Social Reformer*, 23 April 1837, p. 249.

²³ The image is positioned in the centre of the front page, directly below the title and, as the only illustration in the issue, the Poor Law commentary is privileged by its visual representation.

²⁴ Gilbert Abbott À Beckett was the editor of *Figaro* for the first three years after its launch in 1831. Editorship was then passed on to Henry Mayhew, author of the influential study *London Labour and the London Poor*. Interestingly, À Beckett worked for the Poor Law Commission. See Paul Schlicke, 'Gilbert Abbott À Beckett (1811-1856)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press, 2004, online edition May 2009. Available online at: <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/26> [date accessed 21 March 2014]. *Figaro* was one of the most successful magazines and had a circulation of 70,000. See James, *Fiction for the Working Man*, p. 20.

expressed to the same extent by the written narrative. In ‘The New Poor Laws’ (fig. 6; 1836), a beadle in uniform is depicted in front of a workhouse refusing relief to a poor man and his family.²⁵ In the image, this refusal of relief is manifested as an act of violence: the beadle kicks the applicant for relief in the stomach, while the ragged and starving family look on in shock.²⁶ The act of striking the pauper in his stomach is a metaphor for the perceived Malthusian intentions of the New Poor Law: to physically assault the bodies of the poor by depriving them of food.²⁷ Above the beadle is a sign reading ‘no relief’ which reinforces the merciless message delivered by this representative of the workhouse. The ‘New Poor Laws Tavern’, pictured on the right of the scene, provides a contrast to the formidable workhouse building. Three men, presumably meant to represent the three Poor Law Commissioners, sit toasting one another, apparently celebrating their success at starving the bodies of the poor.²⁸

Viewers of the illustration are instructed to turn to the next page for the associated text, which is largely a comment upon the New Poor Law. The accusatory article draws attention to the paupers as commodities to be traded to the anatomists, pointing out that the poor are now ‘literally *burked* under the New Poor Law Bill’.²⁹ Working within the law, the Commissioners are ‘accessories before the fact, to at least a hundred murders’.³⁰ Referring to the illustration, the text states that,

²⁵ Ledger draws attention to the prominence of the beadle in anti-Poor Law discussion: ‘[t]he bloated, overfed figure of the parish beadle, who contrasts ironically with the starving poor whom he disciplines, heavily populates anti-Poor Law literature of the 1830s and 1840s: Dickens was neither the first nor the last to focus on this much-derided lackey’. Ledger, *Dickens*, p. 82.

²⁶ Ledger also notes that ‘the perceived moral brutality of the New Poor Law is translated into literal physical violence’ in this illustration. Ledger, *Dickens*, p. 85.

²⁷ In *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, Robert Malthus put forward the theory that the growth of the population far exceeded the amount of food available and that this was exacerbated by poor relief, which only encouraged families to have more children and so resulted in an increase in poverty. For more information, see Geoffrey Gilbert, ‘Introduction’, in T. R. Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, ed. Geoffrey Gilbert (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. vii-xxv.

²⁸ Ledger draws out a similar reading of this scene, noting that ‘[a]gain, a consumption trope is central to the image’s meaning: the unrestrained over-consumption of the portly Poor Law officials is contrasted with the regulated dietary of the poor, their bodies consumed by deprivation’. Ledger, *Dickens*, p. 83.

²⁹ ‘The New Poor Laws’, *Figaro*, 20 February 1836, p. 30. ‘Burking’ was a colloquialism which meant murder for the purpose of selling the dead body to the anatomists.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

Seymour [...] has this week furnished us with a touch of the pathos, that comes with peculiar force upon us who have been used to witness the most eccentric gambols of his flame-tipped pencil. His present effort will, we know, bring a stream of tears into the eyes of the looker on, and we therefore leave the subject, to give time for the proper flowing of the truly Nigerian cataract of sympathy'.³¹

The text suggests that the image is forceful enough to need no accompanying explanation. A 'looker on', the article implies, should be left to absorb the image with no interference from the text. Though hyperbolic in tone, the text suggests that the image has the potential to elicit a greater emotional response.

The murderous intentions of the Poor Law and its authorities were reiterated time and again. In 'The Poor Law Murderers', *Figaro* claims the credit for making the new system so unpopular.³² A caricature accompanying the article (fig. 7; 1836) evokes humour by stripping the deterrent workhouse system down to its barest form: the three Poor Law Commissioners are shown enacting the '*starving act*' by literally pulling bread out of the mouth of a workhouse pauper.³³ The written text plays up the artistry of the image, suggesting that '[o]ur artist, who in the good cause is always ready to go the *whole hog* with us, has pounced down, with all the neatness of the dancing bear, and all the grandeur of the Cassowary, upon the Whig Poor Law Commissioners'.³⁴ In the image, as the woman desperately tries to retain her rations, two of the Commissioner assailants hold her down and the third uses both hands to yank the bread from her in the name of saving money for the pictured treasure chest, marked 'Whig savings'. The article explains that 'the money saved by the pretended retrenchment in

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Figaro* claims that, 'it is, we repeat, quite certain, that entirely, or almost entirely, to us is owing the frightful degree of unpopularity that attaches itself to the odious Poor Law enactment. It is we that have, singlehanded, grappled with the real root of all the evil, and hurled javelins of indignation against, not only the authors of it, but against all those who practise its inhuman atrocities.' See 'The Poor Law Murderers', *Figaro*, 12 November 1836, pp. 185-186 (p. 185).

³³ *Ibid.* The written text explains that the image is, in part, a response to an earlier incident reported in the news: 'It will be remembered that an affair was made public, a few weeks ago, about the pilfering of oatmeal by a parson, or his servants, who thus got their gruel out of the extremely limited rations of the inmates of the workhouse. We shall not mention names, for fear of accidents; but these men, in so doing, were only following the example of their masters, in taking away, for their own benefit, a portion of the wretched pittance of the ill-used and oppressed paupers.' *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

the workhouse has been swallowed up, over and over again, by [...the Whig ministers...] and their friends, in the shape of all sorts of Whig Commissioners'.³⁵ Once again, the language of consumption, both of food and economics, informs this anti-Poor Law protest; the frugal monetary savings, symbolised by the loaf of bread, will be 'swallowed' up by political bodies at the expense of the poor.

The gluttonous consumption of the Commissioners was further commented upon in a caricature accompanying the article 'State Paupers and Parish Paupers' (fig. 8; 1837) in *Figaro*. In the two opposing vignettes that make up the image, the magazine draws attention to the impoverished condition of a parish pauper and contrasts this with the lavish lifestyle enjoyed by what it calls 'aristocratic beggars' (those who have done 'some act of disgusting and degrading servility to some power of the time being').³⁶ In the left vignette, a ragged 'parish' pauper sits miserably in a prison-like workhouse setting; she is being offered a chunk of bread by a fat, mean-looking official, in whose hand is a jar labelled 'dirty water'.³⁷ In the second image, a 'state' pauper or 'aristocratic beggar', defined in the written text as a 'singular beast, who wallows in the oil and fat of the land', reclines on a chaise longue, smoking his pipe and being waited on by a man in livery, who is identified in the written account as representing Lord John Russell.³⁸ The bottle of dirty water is replaced in this image by a bottle of perfume, suggesting the dandyish, self-indulgent lifestyle of the effeminate state pauper. On the floor lies a casually discarded piece of paper with the heading 'pension', invoking the print 'Poor Laws in England' and implying that the taxes of working people are funding the depraved excesses of this figure. These state paupers are imagined as

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ 'State Paupers and Parish Paupers', *Figaro*, 15 April 1837, pp. 57-58 (p. 57). The idea of the 'state pauper' recalls the satirical comment upon Lord Brougham's "'out door" pauper allowance' in 'A Retired Chancellor's Meal'.

³⁷ The written text notes that, '[a] poor devil of a woman, a few days ago, positively preferred the quiet mode of dying in the streets to the alternative of having her last life blood sacrificed in a parochial jug of dirty water, and her last moments embittered by the ruffianism of gentlemen in cocked hats and leaden-headed staves'. *Ibid.*, p. 58.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

social parasites feeding off the state at the cost of the poor.³⁹ As the written text states, ‘here we must be permitted to borrow the words of Shakespeare, and say with him, “Look on this picture, and on this!”’⁴⁰ By ‘borrowing’ a line from *Hamlet*, in which Hamlet compares the image of his father with that of his murderous uncle, the text suggests that the image is akin to a scene from a Shakespearian tragedy and accords it a similar value.⁴¹ The ‘state’ pauper is implicitly associated with the criminality of Hamlet’s uncle.

This trend for contrasting scenes of poverty and wealth is used in an article in the *Penny Satirist*, titled ‘The Royal Nuptials’ (fig. 9; 1840), for political comment upon the recent marriage of Victoria and Albert. Here, a scene from the workhouse is juxtaposed with a scene from the royal palace. In the top half of the image feasting German royals, satirically termed ‘paupers’, are depicted carousing at a banquet for Victoria and Albert. The image and text aim to construct Albert as avaricious and his countrymen as impoverished: the German flag, pictured knotted to the English flag, is ragged and the German guests have torn garments and are missing shoes. In the scene they raise goblets, etched with pound signs, to indicate that they are merrily drinking England’s prosperity.⁴² By contrast, the bottom half of the image depicts paupers in a workhouse, the men on one side of the scene and the women on the other. In the centre of this image, five men are depicted preparing a cauldron of ‘Bastile Soup’, the ingredients of which are old shoes, kitchen stuff, leather breeches and leather aprons. The accompanying written text, titled ‘A blow out for the English Paupers in Honour of the Royal Wedding Day’, identifies the figures as Russell, Melbourne, the Bishop

³⁹ Commenting upon the engraving *Heaven and Earth* (1830), by Robert Seymour, Ledger draws attention to the focus on a ‘consuming upper world in stark contrast to the starving inhabitants of lower-earth, bodies that are being devoured by the juggernaut of political economy that enjoyed ideological currency in the 1830s and 1840s’. Ledger, *Dickens*, p. 79. The image in *Figaro* (perhaps also by Seymour, a regular contributor to the magazine) similarly invokes an all-consuming elite class.

⁴⁰ ‘State Paupers and Parish Paupers’, p. 57.

⁴¹ The reference to the moment in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* when Hamlet surveys the picture of his dead father and uncle implies a reader who is well read.

⁴² In the accompanying satirical verses to this image, Albert sings ‘For thirty thousand pounds I’ve got,/ And what is hers is mine’. ‘The Royal Nuptials’, *Penny Satirist*, 15 February 1840, p. [1].

and Brougham. The workhouse is invoked here to make a satirical comment upon a state that feeds its wealth to foreigners yet neglects its own subjects.

In the images ‘A Scene at Seven-Oaks’ and ‘A Scene at Windsor’ (fig. 10, 1841), also published in the *Penny Satirist*, Prince Albert is once again pictured against the workhouse system. The first image, ‘A Scene at Seven-Oaks’, plays upon the chilling associations of the workhouse and depicts a scene in which sleeping paupers hang by ropes that look horribly similar to nooses. Below them, hundreds of paupers are packed in layers upon the floor. The sensational accompanying text claims that ‘[o]ur Artist has happily displayed to all, that which has hitherto been hidden and practised in the dark and deathly chambers’.⁴³ It alleges that, within the workhouse, ‘poor babies are huddled together in a manner the most disgusting – packed up, body upon body, with not even the divisions of each corpse in a charnel-house, or carcasses heaped on a plague pile’.⁴⁴ This image is intended to be read in conjunction with the image that was published next to it, ‘A Scene at Windsor’, in which a concerned Prince Albert is pictured checking on the Royal Hounds in their kennel. The accompanying text reads ‘[h]ere we have a scene of a very different character!!! Prince Albert is full of anxiety for his hounds – he is fearful that they have suffered from want of clean bedding and luxurious repose’.⁴⁵ The images together make the point that animals are better cared for than the poor and comment on the humanity of a society that prizes dogs above people. As in ‘State Paupers and Parish Paupers’, readers are again instructed to ‘Look on this Picture! [...] And on this!!!’

Many of the caricatures discussed invoke ideas of foreignness with which to contrast the workhouse system and the threat this poses to the honest English poor: for example, the title of the print ‘Poor Laws in England’ invokes a nationalistic response to the scene; the article ‘State Paupers and Parish Paupers’ constructs the state pauper as a beast living off the

⁴³ ‘A Scene at Seven-Oaks’, *Penny Satirist*, 18 December 1841, p. [1].

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ ‘A Scene at Windsor’, *Penny Satirist*, 18 December 1841, p. [1].

‘oil and fat of the land’; and the caricatures that represent Prince Albert suggest the exploitation of England by Germany. The disgust at the treatment of the ‘English’ poor is nowhere more evident than in an article and corresponding illustration in *Spectator: A Rochdale Miscellany*. In the written article, ‘The New Poor Law’, the workhouse is constructed as an anti-English institution; the article asserts that ‘[o]ur own aged, and infirm countrymen – our countrymen in blood, complexion, language, and religion, [are] doomed to drag out the lingering remains of their lives in a house little better than a prison’.⁴⁶ By contrast to the lot of the English pauper, the article points out that a West Indies slave, purchased for vast sums of ‘English money’, lives in ‘circumstances of ease and plenty’.⁴⁷ The text seeks to create a sense of unity between reader and pauper, and urges readers to conceive of the workhouse as a personal offence to their English identity. The corresponding engraving (fig. 11; 1844) depicts a section of the exterior façade of the workhouse, and the sign ‘BASTILE’ [*sic*] is prominent above the towering wooden door of the building.⁴⁸ Above the sign, a carving of a skull and cross bones suggests the doom awaiting the paupers inside. Two other written labels in the image confirm the function of the workhouse as a macabre charnel house; to the left of the doorway, a placard reads ‘Warranted to Starve on 6 pence a

⁴⁶ ‘The New Poor Law’, *Spectator: A Rochdale Miscellany*, 1 November 1844, pp. 69-71 (p. 70).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* Debates about the slave trade, abolished in Britain and the Empire in 1833, were still contemporary in the early 1840s, as an additional anti-slavery Act was passed in 1843.

⁴⁸ The comparison of the workhouse to the Bastille was fuelled by the popular perception that prison inmates were better treated than workhouse paupers. Workhouse paupers had a more meagre diet than prison inmates, had less comfortable lodgings and had a heavier workload exacted from them. The weeping illustration of a poor man in ‘The Pauper’s Song’ (1845), published in *Punch*, gives expression to the hopeless predicament of the honest poor; reduced to destitution, the man must choose between becoming an inmate of the workhouse or the prison. The verses of the song emphasise that the prison is a more eligible choice than the workhouse. See ‘The Pauper’s Song’, *Punch*, 18 January 1845, p. 38. Similarly, ‘Song for the Throng; Or, Versification for the Nation’ (1863), published in *Fun*, contrasts the image of a prisoner with that of a pauper. The prisoner, pictured beneath the heading ‘chastisement’, is well fed and well clothed; the detail of a book on the floor suggests that he has time for leisure. By contrast, the pauper pictured beneath the heading, ‘charity’, is thin and ragged. He is depicted performing the gruelling task of breaking stones. See ‘Song for the Throng; or, Versification for the Nation’, *Fun*, 3 January 1863, p. 157. In relation to ‘The Pauper’s Song’, Charlotte Boyce discusses the middle-class anxiety that ‘an overly punitive system of poor relief might precipitate working-class criminality’. She suggests that ‘[t]he call for reform implicit in *Punch*’s “Pauper’s Song” emanates [...] from a fairly conservative desire to maintain social order’. For more information, see Charlotte Boyce, ‘Representing the Nation in the “Hungry Forties” in Image and Verse: The Politics of Hunger in Early-Victorian Illustrated Periodicals’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 40:2 (2012), 421-449 (p. 427).

week no Grumbling Allowed’ and, on the opposite side, another sign announces ‘Notice. The Poor Taken in Here and Done For’. Discernable amongst the small figures making their way up to the workhouse doors are an elderly couple with walking sticks, a woman with two small children, and an individual who appears to have a wooden leg. By depicting the elderly, the young and the disabled, the image makes the point that it is society’s most helpless individuals who are sacrificed to the tyrannical workhouse regime. In the forefront of the image, a man in a suit and top hat, presumably a Poor Law guardian, wields a whip that appears to fall across the back of a hunched pauper man. On the left of the image the menacing detail of a black dog is visible, chasing the paupers inside the house. Much of the eeriness of the image derives from the lack of perspective; the disproportionate sketches result in the workhouse, the dog and the master looming large over the figures of the paupers, who are almost insect-like in their size and vulnerability.⁴⁹

As well as being an anti-English institution, the workhouse in the caricatures is also represented as being contrary to the doctrines of Christianity. One of the most hated aspects of the workhouse system was the separation of families and married couples within the institution; the parting of those whom God had joined together in holy matrimony was conceived of by opponents of the Poor Law as unnatural and an act of blasphemy.⁵⁰ News reports of pauper men and women refused permission to see their dying spouse or children, or left ignorant of their deaths, fuelled the horrifying conception of the workhouse in the popular imagination.⁵¹ The cruelty of this regime of separation thus became the subject of political

⁴⁹ In ‘The Model Union Workhouse’ in *Punch*, the paupers are visualised as worker bees droning into a beehive. See ‘The Model Union Workhouse’, *Punch*, 23 June 1866, p. 259.

⁵⁰ As David Ashforth points out, ‘the [...] system of workhouse classification attracted particular criticism being seen as a threat to family unity and to the sacred institution of marriage’. See David Ashforth, ‘The Urban Poor Law’, in *The New Poor Law in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Derek Fraser (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1976), pp. 128-148 (p. 129).

⁵¹ *The Times* printed an extract from a story about the cruel treatment received by a pauper and his wife in the Deptford workhouse. The narrative focuses upon the separation of the married couple in the house: ‘The cruel act of earthly legislation flings its mortal defiance at Heaven’s express command – “those whom God hath joined it doth put asunder” [–] the wife was dragged from the side of her husband, and the wretched paupers

satire in numerous articles.⁵² One such text to visually depict the trauma of separation is ‘The Fruits of the New Poor Law Bill’ (fig. 12; 1836), published in *Figaro*. In this image, the focus is upon the violence implicit in a workhouse regime that literally tears families apart. The obese, pompous authority figure holds out his arm imperiously in the image, indicating that the pauper man should be taken away to the men’s ward. In the left of the image, framed within the doorway, a ragged woman is pulled away from her husband and her children as an official raises a stick to beat her. In the right of the image, the father of the children reaches back desperately for them as he is dragged away by a brutish-looking man wielding a raised truncheon. The final lines of the accompanying article explain that

[o]ur caricaturist has [...] boldly grappled with another portion of the crying evil, and has shot from his formidable bow one of his most barbed and jagged satiric arrows at that portion of the New Poor Act, which allows the separation of parents and children. [...] The caricature which adorns our present number, shows a Whig Commissioner exercising his brute force to effect a separation of father and children. The picture is true, but harrowing. Milton’s Satan is ghastly, but startling for its verisimilitude. Second only to Milton’s Satan is the *cut* of our artist.⁵³

Playing upon the ‘cut’ of the image, the written text invokes both the form of a wood engraving and the violent thrust of a physical attack; the text conceives of the image as a violent response to the brutality inherent in the workhouse system. Though a satirical caricature, emphasis is placed upon the claim to truth and the image attempts to represent a version of reality to viewers.

In ‘Poor-Law Union Scenes’ (fig. 13; 1839) in the *Penny Satirist*, the focus is again upon the violence implicit in the separation of families within the workhouse. Wood-engraved vignettes depict the cruelty of this separation offset against the luxury enjoyed by

were parted in their last asylum before the grave!’ The text recounts how the husband was refused leave to go to the bedside of his dying wife. See ‘Stories of the Poor Law Bill’, *The Times*, 12 October 1837, p. 2.

⁵² Ledger points out that ‘[t]he focus on women and children, and on the destruction of the working-class family, is [...] entirely typical of the literature and graphic art of the anti-Poor Law movement’. Ledger, *Dickens*, p. 79.

⁵³ ‘The Fruits of the New Poor Law Bill’, *Figaro*, 10 September 1836, p. 149.

the Commissioners.⁵⁴ The accompanying verse, extracted from the publication *Poor Law Rhymes* (1839), narrates a married couple's decision to leave home and go to the workhouse:

Richard – Oh Jane! we perish
 With craving famine now;
 And may not cherish
 Our holy marriage vow
 The law which bound us man and wife,
 For better or for worse through life,
 That law gives tyranny a knife
 To rend its own bond now.⁵⁵

The first engraving privileges this moment of separation. A man and a woman, about to become inmates of the workhouse, are pictured being ripped from their farewell embrace by workhouse officials.⁵⁶ The beadle, again the instigator of violence, grabs hold of the woman's left arm, while a second man pulls her right arm and a third grasps her around the waist. A fourth man stands smirking in the background. The scene looks like a violent assault on the body of the woman and represents the agents of the workhouse system as thugs who tear apart the 'holy marriage vow'. The Poor Law is represented as a tyrannical regime that literally pulls apart the bodies of the poor, dividing families in life, and anatomising their bodies in death.

One of the most Gothicised images of separation is *Punch*'s 'The "Milk" of Poor-Law "Kindness"' (fig. 14; 1843), which takes up a full page of the magazine.⁵⁷ The corresponding written text describes a case from the Bethnal Green workhouse, in which a five-week infant

⁵⁴ In the second vignette, entitled 'The Contrast', a drawing room of a wealthy Poor Law official is contrasted with the stark interior of a poor family's cottage. In the left image, a fat, wealthy man sits smoking in the plush interior; a decanter and a wine glass sit on the table beside him, and pictures and mirrors line the walls. The other half of the image depicts a poor family dressed in patched and ragged clothing. These contrasting images recall *Figaro*'s 'State Paupers and Parish Paupers'.

⁵⁵ Extract from 'Poor Law Rhymes', in 'Poor-Law Union Scenes', *Penny Satirist*, 30 March 1839, p. [1].

⁵⁶ The violent separation of husband and wife in the workhouse is also visualised in the image 'Poor Law Sketches – the Separation' in the *Odd Fellow*. As in 'Poor Law Union Scenes', this image depicts a husband and wife being pulled from one another by brutal-looking Poor Law officials. Above the scene, the words 'Work House' makes clear that this violent separation is emblematic of the workhouse system. See 'Poor Law Sketches – the Separation', *Odd Fellow*, 6 July 1839, p. 105.

⁵⁷ Ledger also analyses this article and points out that it 'reprises one of the most recurrent and emotive themes of the literature of the anti-Poor Law movement that continued to flourish in the 1840s'. See Ledger, *Dickens*, p. 107

was reportedly taken away from the mother and brought to her only to be breastfed. The image, which responds to this report, emphasises the unnaturalness of this separation. It is a melodramatic depiction of a mother thrown back in her chair in the theatrical pose of a tragic heroine, as her baby is torn from her arms by a pauper nurse. This nurse, who is described as a ‘Poor-Law witch’ and a childless ‘Sycorax’, is imagined visually as a hunched and malevolent-looking hag.⁵⁸ By contrast to the menacing features of the pauper nurse, the rounded figures of the mother and the baby sentimentalise them in order to elicit sympathy for their plight. A grinning devil, drawn standing behind the pauper nurse and implicitly her double, looks across and clicks his fingers at a weeping angel, who is positioned behind, and aligned with, the weeping mother.⁵⁹ The devil, complete with fangs and wings, is the imagined embodiment of the New Poor Law, while the smaller figure of the angel, who turns away from the scene and covers his face in grief, represents the values of Christian charity and love that are effaced by the workhouse system. The heavily ironic text describes how mothers are prevented from the maternal pleasure of even looking at their babies: ‘step-dame Poor Law forbids the luxury, and snatching the baby to its parchment breast, carries it off, until it squall and squall again for the maternal bosom’.⁶⁰ Sensationally, the text points to the lengths that parents have gone to in order to save their children from such a separation in the workhouse; describing a previously ‘gentle’ man who went mad from fear of the Poor Law, the text explains that ‘[h]e has saved his children from the Union by blessing them with coffins’.⁶¹ The Poor Law is imagined in text and image as a cruel stepmother who usurps the

⁵⁸ ‘The “Milk” of Poor-Law “Kindness”’, *Punch*, 4 January 1843, p. 46-47 (p. 46). Henry Mayhew, editor of *Figaro* after À Beckett, was one of the founders of the three penny *Punch*. For more information on *Punch*, see Richard D. Altick, *Punch: The Lively Youth of a British Institution 1841-1851* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1997).

⁵⁹ As Ledger points out, ‘[t]he presence of the angel suggests the iconography of Madonna and child, implying a critique of contemporary Christianity that Jerrold also exploits in his accompanying text’. See Ledger, *Dickens*, p. 108.

⁶⁰ ‘The “Milk” of Poor-Law “Kindness”’, p. 46.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

place of a natural mother and recalls the satirical description of ‘Mothers Brougham and Martineau’ in ‘Interior’.⁶²

The unnaturalness of the workhouse system in ‘The Milk of Poor Law Kindness’ is even more grotesquely realised in discussion of the 1845 Andover workhouse scandal. At this particular workhouse, paupers were set to work crushing bones, and the newspapers reported that, because the dietary allowance was so meagre, the paupers had resorted to sucking the marrow from these bones.⁶³ The suggestion of cannibalism, more usually employed in anti-Poor Law articles to suggest the consumption of the bodies of the poor by the social elite, became alarmingly real in the Andover case; the *Northern Star and National Trades’ Journal* reports that ‘[h]uman beings, in this Christian England, are forced by law-produced poverty and law-administered “charity,” to turn *cannibals*’, and reveals that the bones were ‘collected from various sources, including frequently the bones of horses as well as of other animals and “occasionally”, *some from churchyards*’.⁶⁴ The workhouse is constructed here as an institution that promulgates a monstrous version of breastfeeding: English men are forced to suck nutrients from the decaying bones of animals or even human corpses.

The *Penny Satirist* responded to the scandal by making it the subject of a biting caricature. ‘The Andover Bastile’ (fig. 15; 1845) contrasts two vignettes: the first is titled ‘The Poor Picking the Bones to Live’ and the second ‘The Commission of Enquiry Discussing the Subject over a Good Dinner’. The first vignette represents a scene at Andover workhouse. The paupers in this image, with their unkempt hair and bared teeth, are animalised by their depiction fighting over the bones; one man crouches, beastlike, on the

⁶² Ledger also notes the ‘Poor-Law-as-mother trope’. Ledger, *Dickens*, p. 109.

⁶³ ‘The Bone-Gnawing Atrocity’, *Northern Star and National Trades’ Journal*, 16 August 1845, p. 4.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* Fears about workhouse paupers being forced to cannibalise one another were not new. Richardson notes that, in 1829, a pauper sparked a mass panic by claiming that the food contained human remains. See Richardson, *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*, pp. 221-222. A ballad that circulated in various versions during the nineteenth century narrates the grisly fate of a missing pauper boy, whose clothing and bones found in the kitchen copper reveals that ‘dreadful to tell he was boiled in the soup’. See ‘The Workhouse Boy’, printed by J. Pitts, London, between 1819 and 1844, *Bodleian Library Broadside Ballads*, University of Oxford. Available online at: <http://www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/ballads/> [date accessed 8 January 2013].

floor to gnaw a bone, while another man desperately attempts to get his teeth into one before it is snatched away from him by a pursuing mob. By contrast, the second vignette depicts the rich dinner enjoyed by the Commissioners who have been employed to investigate the Andover scandal. Once again, the contrasting images criminalise the excesses of the Commissioners, who gratify their hunger with rich delicacies while their pauper counterparts are driven by starvation to gnaw bones. The vignettes are set above sensational newspaper excerpts about the scandal. When read in dialogue with these supposedly ‘factual’ reports, the images take on a kind of factuality themselves and implicitly become another version of documentary evidence.⁶⁵

A month later, the *Penny Satirist* published another image commenting upon the Andover scandal. ‘The Three Kings of Somerset-House’ (fig. 16; 1845) responds to reports in the press and transforms fact and speculation into a visual satire upon the Poor Law Commissioners, who are personified as Disease, Cruelty and Death. On the far right of the image, the Commissioner representing Disease is covered with the pox; to the left of him sits the skeleton representing Death, and Cruelty, to the left of Death, holds a many tailed whip. In a mockery of the quasi-royal status of the Commissioners, paupers are depicted bowing down in reverent prayer to these figures, while, to their left, walks a man carrying a heavy bag of ‘putrid bones’. Significantly, the Commissioners are seated on a stage beneath a canopy, the back of which is decorated with the words ‘Memento Mori’. The inclusion of written text functions to invoke the trend popularised in the Renaissance period for the inclusion of symbols of death in portraiture and other works of art. Frequently, pictured amidst scenes of power and wealth, these grim reminders of death sought to remind a viewer

⁶⁵ The sensationalised written text, published on the following page, explains that the paupers ‘fight for the possession of the best bones – those that have the gristle left at the joints and the marrow in the centre – and we are told most positively by the witnesses that even human bones have been mingled with the lot, and that human carrion itself has thus been indiscriminately mixed up with the food of the poor’. See ‘The Parliamentary Summer’, *Penny Satirist*, 6 September 1845, p. 2.

of the transience of life and the pointlessness of material acquisition. This message of *momento mori* is subverted in 'The Three Kings of Somerset-House': the starving paupers in the scene are not likely to suffer from any delusions about their own mortality.

Newspaper reports about paupers who chose to die rather than endure the regime of separation and subsequent brutalised life in the workhouse, construct it as a fate worse than death. The intense fear of the workhouse is visualised in a full page image in *Punch* by John Leech, entitled 'The Poor Man's Friend' (fig. 17; 1845). Rather than picturing abuses inside the institution, this image is instead suggestive of unseen workhouse horrors, which imply that death is preferable to setting foot inside the institution. Viewers of the image are positioned inside the cottage of an impoverished man, who is lying on his death bed. Framed within the small window is a distant building with the sign 'union' upon it. The proximity of the union workhouse to the poor man's home suggests its looming threat and that, compared to the haunting terrors of the workhouse, 'Death' is a comparative 'Friend' to the poor. The man's hands are clasped in prayer, but he is not praying for recovery; instead he prays to 'Death', a hooded, skeletal figure leaning over the bed amidst plumes of mist, to relieve him from the terror of having to leave home and go into the institution. The extent of the man's poverty is suggested by the ragged and patched blanket covering him, and his slow starvation is evident in the empty plate on his table. The spade and hard hat on the floor, at the forefront of the image, imply that the man has been an industrious member of society who is now too infirm to earn a living. Rather than depicting the workhouse itself, the image represents the irony of a state institution meant to offer relief to the poor that is so hated by them that they would choose to die rather than become an inmate. There is no obvious written text associated with this image; it seems that the impact of the image is such to render the written word unnecessary.

The Architecture of Poverty

The numerous satirical and sensationalist caricatures address the reader as a politically engaged member of society who is implicitly opposed to the state-enforced Poor Law. While these illustrations use biting humour for political comment, other anti-workhouse images seek to condemn the workhouse system by realistically visualising the forbidding architecture of the institution. Much of the anti-Poor Law writing of the 1830s responded to the fact that the architectural designs of new workhouses were modelled on plans for prisons. Radial designs for workhouses by Sampson Kempthorne, the official architect for the Poor Law Commission, were based upon the disciplinary principles of inspection and surveillance and perpetuated the comparison of the house to a penitentiary.⁶⁶ Windows or, more specifically, the lack of windows, were a frequent topic of discussion in anti-Poor Law literature; they were usually placed above the eye-line of the paupers, letting in light, but deliberately refusing them a view of anything but sky or wall. By restricting the gaze of the paupers, while at the same time subjecting them to the constant gaze of the master in his central apartments, the building engineered the complete disempowerment of its inmates.⁶⁷ Sketches, illustrations and diagrams of workhouse architecture were utilised by those who sought to criticise the state-imposed workhouse system and suggest that the striking appearance of these new buildings rendered the workhouse an institution particularly suited to visual

⁶⁶ Morrison points out that ‘Kempthorne’s designs gave the workhouse, as a building type, a distinct architectural identity of its own for the first time in its history’. See Kathryn Morrison, *The Workhouse: A Study of Poor-Law Buildings in England* (Swindon: English Heritage at the National Monuments Record Centre, 1999), p. 53.

⁶⁷ Designs for workhouses are discussed in relation to the gaze of the workhouse master in chapter two. That Kempthorne’s striking designs were reproduced in publications such as the *British Almanac* and the *Mirror of Literature, Amusement, and Instruction* suggests the dissemination of workhouse architecture in popular discourse. Although these two publications do not, in fact, criticise the institution, the appearance of workhouse buildings became subject to intense debate and was much lambasted by opponents of the New Poor Law.

portrayal.⁶⁸ A politically-charged tension between the gaze of the viewer upon the scene and the blinded view of the unseen pauper is latent in these images

The fact that the workhouse lent itself to visual representation is strongly apparent in a reader's letter about the Bridge union workhouse in the *Champion*, a radical four penny newspaper associated with Chartism.⁶⁹ The letter is titled 'A Union Workhouse' (1836) and opens with the lines 'Sir, I send you a sketch of a Union Workhouse, as I see that it is your intention to put before your readers, as occasion requires it, any novelty that admits better of graphic than literal description'.⁷⁰ The visual impact of the workhouse is apparent in the writer's statement that he was prompted to write to the newspaper having been physically shocked by the workhouse façade. As the writer relates, '[t]he *appearance*, then, of the UNION WORKHOUSE, as it is new to me, is a sight that struck and arrested me on a short journey that I lately took among the hop-plantations and gardens of Kent'.⁷¹ Unlike the obvious caricaturing of the house in the illustrations discussed previously, the text and image in the *Champion* lay claim to a factual representation of the workhouse; as the writer asserts, '[t]he drawing that I send you, I took from the life. It is as correct a representation as I could put on paper, of the BRIDGE UNION WORKHOUSE'.⁷² The letter pays attention to the architectural appearance of the house, describing its quadrangular shape and the bare outside walls that have only one small window.⁷³ The house itself presents aesthetic problems for the sketcher; he explains that, if he had sketched from up close, the view would have been only

⁶⁸ Longmate points out that '[a]ny traveller riding down the dusty or muddy lanes of Southern England between 1835 and 1840 [...] could not have failed to notice the vast new buildings which seemed to be springing up everywhere'. See Longmate, *The Workhouse*, p. 13.

⁶⁹ The newspaper contains multiple articles that criticise the New Poor Law.

⁷⁰ 'A Union Workhouse', *Champion and Weekly Herald*, 2 October 1836, p. 21.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Morrison points out that '[a] workhouse with the appearance of a prison [...] was exactly the ideal of the Assistant Commissioner Sir Francis Head. The blind outer walls of the Kent workhouses erected to his courtyard plan presented a forbidding aspect to the outer world. They made an unmistakeable statement about the culpability of pauperism, and warned would-be paupers to expect no comforts within'. Morrison, *The Workhouse*, p. 53. For discussion and images of the courtyard plan workhouses, see *ibid.*, pp. 54-59.

of ‘two bare walls and two bare roofs [...] which would scarcely give you an idea of it’.⁷⁴ Having ‘pondered on the scene, and thinking how I could take a view of it that would look tolerable on paper’, the writer describes how he decided to sketch the house from an elevated position;⁷⁵ this consideration thus suggests the writer’s self-conscious awareness that he is creating an image for an audience. Referring to the drawing, the text explains that the windows visible in this representation are those of the guardian’s board room and the master’s quarters, which are carefully positioned so as to ensure that ‘the whole thing is scrupulously under eye’.⁷⁶ Recollecting that the chairman of the Poor Law Commissioners used to boast about having twenty-eight windows in the front of his house, the writer reflects upon the irony of his planning a house with none: ‘I fancied the man of “*eight-and-twenty windows in front,*” sitting down to plan a house for the poor, in which there should be no windows at all, whether front or back’.⁷⁷ Vision is represented as a class-based commodity that is the rightful property of the well-off and something to be restricted from the poorest members of society.

A notice in a later issue of the *Champion* informs readers that the sketch of the Bridge union workhouse (fig. 18; 1836) is included within the paper. This inclusion is said to be due to complaints that many had been unable to see the illustration because ‘our engravings do not go postage-free’.⁷⁸ The lapse of time between the publication of the letter and the illustration indicates the large gap, both physically and temporally, between the text and the image. Having read the letter more than a month earlier, it seems likely that most readers would have encountered this image without the corresponding textual description. The illustration, as described in the letter, depicts a fortress-like building, with high, windowless walls. The commanding representation of the workhouse in the illustration contrasts with its

⁷⁴ ‘A Union Workhouse’, p. 21.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ ‘Notice to Readers of the Weekly Herald’, *Champion and Weekly Herald*, 20 November 1836, p. 76.

location amidst idyllic-looking countryside, nestled in front of rolling hills and surrounded by trees and pastures upon which cattle graze. Cottage homes visible in the far-left hand side of the drawing suggest the isolation of the workhouse from the rest of society. Although the house is pictured within a pastoral setting, this context heightens the pathos of the inmates shut behind windowless walls that prevent them from so much as a glimpse of the beauty of the nature surrounding them.

Two verses of George Crabbe's poem 'The Village' (1783) appear beneath the image. The poem emphasises the pathos of the workhouse which is home to, amongst others, 'heart-broken matrons', '[f]orsaken wives, 'mothers never wed', 'dejected widows' and 'moping idiot[s]'.⁷⁹ The image is read alongside the poem and provides readers with an idea of the paupers who inhabit the workhouse, hidden from the sketcher's and the reader's view. The illustration is thus informed by the poignancy of the poem, which, as a consequence of its close proximity to the image, has now become the accompanying text and has more effect upon the reader's construction of the workhouse than the written letter. Poetry, image and news report all combine in this instance to shape a representation of the workhouse, and draw attention to it as a cultural construct informed by a multiplicity of genres.

The nearby Blean workhouse in the Herne union received as much criticism as did the Bridge union workhouse.⁸⁰ In 1839, the *Champion* included a column on the topic of the New Poor Law, which collated extracts from various other newspapers, all of which emphasise the inhumanity of the law. One of these extracts is from *The Times*, which refers to the newly built Blean workhouse as a 'horrible instance of the Poor-Law Amendment Bill'.⁸¹ In

⁷⁹ Quoted from George Crabbe, 'The Village', in 'Sketch of the Bridge Union New Poor-Law Workhouse, near Canterbury', *Champion and Weekly Herald*, 20 November 1836, p. 77.

⁸⁰ The writer of the letter in the *Champion* also describes a visit to the Blean workhouse.

⁸¹ 'New Poor-Law', *Champion and Weekly Herald*, 10 February 1839, p. 8. Morrison notes the 'psychological impact' that workhouse architecture would have had upon inmates: 'that factor alone would have rendered the experience of a pauper in, for example, Bridge or Blean Union Workhouses [...], very different from that of an inmate of Windsor or Amersham'. Morrison, *The Workhouse*, p. 53.

particular, *The Times* comments upon blindness of the paupers within the house, pointing out that,

on the sides not a single window or air-hole has been constructed to allow its unfortunate inmates the least glimpse of the surrounding country, and nothing is to be seen but dead walls.⁸²

The uncanniness of the ‘dead’ walls, behind which the paupers are incarcerated, recalls the macabre tone inscribed in the caricatures and, like them, construct the workhouse as a morgue for the living poor. The emphasis is again upon the paupers’ restricted vision, but there is a sense in this text that the viewer’s gaze is as much frustrated by the ‘dead’ walls, as that of the ‘unfortunate inmates’.

This frustration of the viewer’s sight by the workhouse building is evidenced in the *Illuminated Magazine* article ‘The Two Windows’, which discusses the addition of two windows to the Herne union workhouse. In the illustration (fig. 19; no date), which is positioned before the written text, the distant workhouse building is pictured amidst pastoral countryside and framed by trees. The perspective of the picture drags the viewer’s gaze to the almost-bare façade of the workhouse, which is only relieved by two small windows and a door. Similarly to the image of the Bridge union workhouse, the aesthetic surroundings of this ‘blind, eyeless piece of brickwork’ serve to heighten the ugliness of the building, which is described as ‘a gaol for the iniquity and perverseness of poverty; a Newgate for the felony of want’.⁸³ The language of the text overtly criticises the criminalisation of poverty by the workhouse system and the unnatural restriction of the paupers’ gaze is represented as an ungodly punishment. The subsequent decision of the guardians to give the paupers natural light by adding a window is satirised as a ‘blaspheming burlesque of Almighty

⁸² ‘New Poor-Law’, p. 8.

⁸³ ‘The Two Windows’, *Illuminated Magazine*, vol. III., [no date], pp. 117-118 (p. 117).

Beneficence'.⁸⁴ The images in the *Illuminated Magazine* and the *Champion* both function as a comment upon what a viewer can see and what the paupers inside cannot see. There is an aesthetic issue at stake in these images, as the workhouse building mars the otherwise picturesque countryside. The ugliness of the building amidst the pastoral natural world throws into relief the inherent unnaturalness of the workhouse institution.

Augustus Pugin's 'Contrasted Residences', discussed in chapter two, emphasises the idea of decay implicit in juxtaposing the panoptic modern workhouse with the religious almshouse of the past; as Felix Driver points out, '[s]uch iconography [...] was supposed to represent, in landscape form, what Pugin claimed to be the degeneration of English moral and aesthetic values'.⁸⁵ By contrast to the deterioration suggested by Pugin's text, however, an article in the *Illustrated London News* uses a comparison between two workhouses to suggest a return to a more moral treatment of the poor. In 'New Poor-Law Workhouses' (fig. 20; 1846), an image of the existing Andover workhouse, a penitential-looking building, is contrasted with the more aesthetically-pleasing isometric image of a workhouse to be built at Canterbury to the same design as workhouses already constructed at Aylesbury and Rye. Unlike the image of Andover, the design for Canterbury workhouse features a large arched entrance way, gabled roofs, colonnades and bay windows.⁸⁶ In this image, the brick wall of Andover has been replaced with a fence that makes the building look less prison-like, ostensibly sending a message about the changing treatment of the poor.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 118. Morrison notes that '[a] great improvement was achieved in 1843, when a single window was inserted into the outside walls of the old men's and old women's dining-halls'. Morrison, *The Workhouse*, p. 57.

⁸⁵ Felix Driver, *Power and Pauperism: The Workhouse System, 1834-1884* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 61.

⁸⁶ See description in 'New Poor-Law Workhouses', *Illustrated London News*, 7 November 1846, pp. 303-304 (p. 304). Morrison notes that, in contrast to Kempthorne's designs, workhouses designed by other architects, 'with their diamond-paned casements, shaped gables and diapered brickwork, hinted at charitable benevolence. [...] [I]t is indisputable that an atmosphere of security and domesticity was achieved through the use of an architectural language associated with [almshouses]'. Morrison, *The Workhouse*, p. 53.

⁸⁷ The impact of the visual message is somewhat hampered by the fact that the wrong labels appear beneath the images: Andover workhouse is identified by the label as Canterbury workhouse and *vice versa*. The compositor's mistake means that readers' have to pay close attention to the illustrations, reading them to deduce

The written text similarly suggests a move forward into a more enlightened mode of dealing with pauperism. It responds to a meeting about the disgraced Poor Law Commissioners following the Andover bone-crushing scandal; though the *Illustrated London News* suggests that the Poor Law is ‘essentially humane’, the article points out that its implementation has resulted in corruption.⁸⁸ There is a sense of shame attached to the Andover workhouse discernible in the written text, which describes the insufficient architectural arrangements of the house and, as in previous articles, points out that the windows have been arranged above the eye-line of the paupers. The anonymous writer notes that the first workhouse designs were intended to make the accommodation less attractive than the cottage of the poorest independent labourer and reveals that drawings contained in the first and second *Annual Reports of the Commissioners* are actually drawings of American prisons. The comparison of Andover building with that of Canterbury calls attention to a shift in workhouse architectural design that is due, the text suggests, to public feeling. The text claims that ‘public opinion [now] forbids the erection’ of workhouses like Andover and implies that the planned institutions are in some ways a reflection of contemporary public values.⁸⁹ These proposed designs are said to have some ‘architectural taste’, suggesting a return to the aesthetic values despaired of by Pugin.⁹⁰

Commenting upon the design of the Canterbury workhouse, the written text observes that, ‘it would appear that Mr. Parker did not propose to “test” within four walls the youthful and the aged poor’.⁹¹ Unlike the windowless walls of Andover, in the Canterbury workhouse the windows will be arranged to allow the paupers ‘to enjoy the prospect from them’ and the

which building is Andover and which is Canterbury. Interestingly, Morrison points out that the Canterbury workhouse was never actually built. See Morrison, *The Workhouse*, p. 91.

⁸⁸ ‘New Poor-Law Workhouses’, p. 303.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 304.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.* Morrison writes on this *Illustrated London News* article and, commenting on the design of the Canterbury workhouse, suggests that ‘[t]he relaxation of the workhouse test for these classes had been apparent in some first-generation New Poor Law workhouses, [...] but never quite so blatantly’. Morrison, *The Workhouse*, p. 91.

text notes that, from the already built Aylesbury workhouse, there is a ‘delightful view’, and that France may be seen from the Rye workhouse.⁹² As in the visiting accounts discussed previously, the aesthetic issue of what can and cannot be seen from the windows seems to be integral to a middle-class conceptualisation of the workhouse.⁹³ The two illustrations in ‘Poor Law Workhouses’ point to the importance of the public face of the workhouse, and suggest to viewers that the treatment of the poor inside the houses correlates with the visual appearance of the house.

Pauper Palaces

Workhouses remained in the public eye in the mid-to-late-nineteenth century, but, as predicted by the *Illustrated London News*, this was increasingly consequent upon their sophisticated and aesthetically-pleasing designs.⁹⁴ Exterior façades of workhouse buildings, along with descriptions of their architectural features and design, were featured in popular publications such as *Reynolds’s Miscellany* and the *Lady’s Newspaper*. In a reversal of the anti-English conception of the workhouse in the caricatures, these illustrations represent the workhouses as architectural marvels that are symbolic of the greatness of England. Far from functioning as an indictment of society’s treatment of its poorest members, images of workhouse façades act as a message to middle-class members of society about how a modern England treats its poor. Tellingly, in the majority of these illustrations, the function of the

⁹² ‘New Poor-Law Workhouses’, p. 304.

⁹³ The irony implicit in the admiration of workhouse views by the privileged classes is played upon in Thomas Hardy’s *Far From the Madding Crowd*: ‘it was discovered that the view from the front, over the Casterbridge chimneys, was one of the most magnificent in the country. A neighbouring earl once said that he would give up a year’s rental to have at his own door the view enjoyed by the inmates from theirs’. Thomas Hardy, *Far From the Madding Crowd*, ed. Suzanne B. Falck-Yi (1874; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 263.

⁹⁴ In the article ‘Convivial Pauperism’, the narrator describes the workhouse he visits as a ‘splendid pile of buildings—architecturally speaking’ and how, ‘owing to its grand appearance, it is in the vicinity frequently denominated “the palace for the people”’. For this writer, the splendour of the architecture only serves to emphasise the contrast with the ‘misery’ of the paupers within. See James Pitt, ‘Convivial Pauperism’, *Saint Paul’s Magazine*, February 1871, pp. 435-443 (p. 435).

building is obscured. There are often no visible reminders of pauperism and, frequently, the viewer's eye is drawn to the passers-by outside the buildings. The disturbing associations of poverty, starvation and cruelty (particularly evident in publications associated with Chartism) are absent, replaced instead by a vocabulary of charity, practicality and modernity. Though many widely read periodicals still continued to launch attacks on the workhouse, most notably *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*, the multiple positive representations of the workhouse that circulated in the second half of the century must have fed into a more affable construction of the workhouse in the cultural imagination. Appearing after the defeat of Chartism, at a time in which the middle classes were firmly established as the dominant social group, representations of workhouse architecture seem to have functioned as vehicles for the promotion of bourgeois values and attitudes.

Three years after the article 'New Poor Law Workhouses', the *Illustrated London News* published a written article and illustration about the soon-to-be-completed Fulham and Hammersmith workhouse (fig. 21; 1849). The image depicts the workhouse from a bird's-eye perspective and, like the image of the Canterbury workhouse, visualises what the building would look like upon completion. Unlike the Bridge or Herne union workhouses, this building boasts many windows. Not only this, but children are depicted playing in the grounds of the workhouse. These tiny figures demonstrate the magnificent scale of the building but also suggest a conscious effort to represent a relaxing of the workhouse regime. The institution, the image suggests, does not apply a punitive regime to the innocent.⁹⁵ The corresponding written article creates a strong sense of ceremony and social ritual attached to the completion of the workhouse. The text reports that, following a procession of the union children, the parish authorities and the clergy, '[t]he first stone of this new workhouse [...] was laid by the Right Rev. the Lord Bishop of London' and was watched by 'the leading and

⁹⁵ Figures are used to the same effect in the illustrations in the *Builder*.

other inhabitants of both parishes'.⁹⁶ The building of the new workhouse is thus turned into a public celebration that is presided over by religious figureheads and 'leading' residents. The presence of the Bishop suggests the integration of state and religious power; by contrast to the satirical treatment of the Bishop of London in 'Poor Laws in England', in the *Illustrated London News* the Bishop is a figure of authority, deserving of respect, who validates the building of a new workhouse as an important social occasion. The text reports that pauper children sang in the grounds for the entertainment of the residents, again suggesting the idea of the workhouse as a social spectacle for the middle-class residents. After the ceremony, seventy of these people dined together and '[t]he convivialities of the evening were kept up to a late hour'.⁹⁷ Whereas the caricatures juxtapose scenes of poverty and extravagance for satiric effect, the *Illustrated London News* reports this feasting with no trace of irony. Rather than being discreetly tucked out of sight, the building of a new workhouse becomes an ostentatious show of the nation's wealth and is transformed into a statement about how the state treats the poor.

The cultural discourse surrounding the building of workhouses is most apparent in discussions about the City of London union workhouse, designed by Richard Tress and built on Bow Road in 1848-49.⁹⁸ The short report 'Architectural Decoration Applied to the Workhouse', published in the *Morning Post* in 1849, describes the pleasing façade of this newly built workhouse: anyone walking along the road 'must be struck with the beauty and extent' of the building.⁹⁹ The language of physical impact recalls the description of the

⁹⁶ 'Workhouse for the United Parishes of Fulham and Hammersmith', *Illustrated London News*, 4 August 1849, p. 66.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ Dates of construction in Morrison, *The Workhouse*, p. 89. Andrea Tanner notes that, before this point, 'the City of London Union [...] refused to build a workhouse, spending vast sums of money on farming out its indoor poor miles away from the union offices, while most of its paupers received outdoor relief, largely in cash, supplemented by generous allowances of food and drink'. See Andrea Tanner, 'The Casual Poor and the City of London Poor Law Union, 1837-1869', *Historical Journal*, 42:1 (1999), 183-206 (p. 186).

⁹⁹ 'Architectural Decoration Applied to the Workhouse', *Morning Post*, 13 November 1849, p. 4. This is the same workhouse pictured in 'Christmas Entertainment to the Poor of the City of London Union', *Illustrated London News*, 21 January 1865, pp. 51-52, discussed in chapter three.

workhouse in the *Champion*, but the impact is now because of the building's pleasant appearance. Significantly, the text suggests that the purpose of the building is not obvious because it looks so 'different' to usual workhouses, implying the tasteful concealment of the building's function beneath its exterior façade.¹⁰⁰ As in the description of the Fulham and Hammersmith workhouse in the *Illustrated London News*, the text describes the ceremonial laying of the first stone that took place at the site, implying that the occasion is one that is worthy of public note.

The various images of Bow union workhouse draw attention to the building as a social display of power. In particular, the large scale print, *City of London Union Workhouse, Bow 1847* (fig. 22; 1847) by architect Richard Tress, constructs the institution as an object of cultural and aesthetic value. If not for the title of the print, which indicates that the elaborate building is a workhouse, the edifice might be misinterpreted as a mansion or civic building.¹⁰¹ This detailed image depicts the workhouse set against trees, with multiple figures in and around the grounds and several passers-by strolling past. A man pushing a wheelbarrow in the street looks out of the picture directly at the viewer, drawing them into the scene. In this image, the workhouse is not an isolated building, but is pictured in relation to other city buildings; on the far right of the image, well-dressed members of the public are depicted on the steps of another magnificent-looking building, the edge of which is just visible.¹⁰² The two women in this group are adorned with frills, bonnets and parasols, and have ringletted hair, suggesting their socially-elevated position. These women are in discussion with two men, both of whom gesture with arms and pointed fingers towards the workhouse building, indicating that this institution is their topic of discussion and admiration. As in the visiting

¹⁰⁰ 'Architectural Decoration Applied to the Workhouse', p. 4.

¹⁰¹ As Tanner points out, the workhouse built on Bow Road '[resembled] an Italian Palazzo rather than the Bastille of Poor Law cliché'. Tanner, 'The Casual Poor', p. 200.

¹⁰² The members of the public pictured outside the building provide an implicit contrast to the regime of segregation within.

accounts discussed in chapter three, the people observing the house in the image are aligned with the viewer, in class and in admiration.

In ‘City of London Union House, Bow-Road’, published in the *Lady’s Newspaper*, the Bow union workhouse is again pictured from across the street as a majestic-looking edifice (fig. 23; 1850). The written text proudly announces that the workhouse illustrates the ‘social arrangements’ of this ‘great’ country, suggesting that the grandeur of the building is reflective of the greatness of England.¹⁰³ As the article points out, the workhouse takes ‘a very prominent place’ in the social structures of the country.¹⁰⁴ By contrast to the anti-Poor Law illustrations, this text celebrates the workhouse and the treatment of the poor. It asserts that a ‘vigilant legislation’ is necessary to deal with the destitute classes and to contain their ‘baneful’ influence; the implicit idea of contamination here echoes the language in the *Reports of the Poor Law Commissioners*. In fact, the article desires a more permanent exclusion of the paupers than that offered by the seclusion of the workhouse and suggests that emigration is the answer to the country’s problems.¹⁰⁵ While the paper includes a short list of the rooms in the ground plan, the emphasis of the paper is clearly upon the exterior appearance of the building. Once again, London street life takes prominence in the scene: well-dressed men, women and children loiter outside and look onto the house, and the paupers are conspicuous by their absence. As in previous images, the presence of middle-class passers-by suggests the idea of London life in close proximity to the workhouse and represents the institution as a naturalised part of the city scape which no longer has frightening associations of starvation or ‘burking’.

Fifteen years after the publication of the previous images, the Bow union workhouse was depicted in the article ‘Workhouse of the City of London Union, Bow’ (fig. 24; 1865) in *Reynolds’s Miscellany*, its appearance signalling the continuing interest in this particular

¹⁰³ ‘City of London Union House’, *Lady’s Newspaper*, 13 April 1850, p. 209.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

workhouse. In an echo of the description in the *Morning Post*, the paper states that anyone passing this road ‘must be struck with the picturesque appearance of the Workhouse’.¹⁰⁶ The word ‘picturesque’ suggests that the vocabulary of aesthetics is now inscribed within workhouse architecture and implies that these buildings are worthy of representation for art’s sake. The grandeur of the building is visualised in the accompanying illustration, in which the viewer is again positioned looking at the house as if an observer on the street. As in the print of Bow workhouse, the image depicts the small figure of a gentleman gesturing towards the building; this detail suggests that the workhouse is a subject of public interest and that it should also be of interest to readers of the magazine. The text pays attention to the exterior façade of the house, describing it favourably as having a ‘picturesque and well-proportioned campanile or clock tower, partly covered with Italian tiling’.¹⁰⁷ The building has ‘a happy artistic effect’ and the text draws attention to the ‘skill, artistic taste, and talent’ that the architect has demonstrated.¹⁰⁸ The discourse of aesthetics is even applied to the systemised management of paupers in the house, who are employed in a ‘perfect and desirable manner’, suggesting a unity between the exterior and interior.¹⁰⁹

Apparently, each section of the building has a character about it that is ‘sufficient to explain its use without entering’.¹¹⁰ It is thus suggested that the internal character of the building can be read through the outer appearance: the text thus negates any need for viewers of the house and illustration to see inside.¹¹¹ As in the previous illustrations of Bow workhouse, text and image focus upon the exterior appearance of the workhouse and there is little interest in its internal workings; the paper describes these workings as ‘admirable’ and

¹⁰⁶ ‘Metropolitan Views—Workhouse of the City of London Union, Bow’, *Reynolds’s Miscellany of Romance, General Literature, Science, and Art*, 14 October 1865, p. 261.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

points out that there is ‘classification not to be equalled in any institution in the country’.¹¹² The regime of classification by age and sex, reviled in anti-Poor Law protests, is praised in this article as commendable, apparently because this workhouse manages a complete enforcement of separation between the classes. Unlike the previous texts discussed, there is no sense of shame attached to the enforced separation of families in this article. As a magazine that once resonated with ideas of Chartism, this positive representation of the workhouse, formerly a symbol of the oppression of the working classes by a repressive government, seems to point to a cultural shift in the meanings attached to this institution. In these representations of Bow it is apparent that the workhouse has been incorporated into a middle-class discourse of ‘taste’, a change that is perhaps testament to a society that is now dominated by a large middle class and which is keen to dispel the disturbing associations of the workhouse.¹¹³

The surrounding material on the page would no doubt have also played a part in shaping the impression that readers formed of the workhouse. Peter Sinnema notes that the ‘contradictions’ in terms of content on the pages of the *Illustrated London News* are ‘capable of acting forcefully upon any particular verbal-visual representation’.¹¹⁴ When considering workhouse images in relation to the texts they share the page with, the social ideologies implicit in these workhouse representations become even more apparent.¹¹⁵ An illustration of the newly-completed Risbridge union workhouse was published in the *Illustrated London*

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ *Ibid.* Writing on the architecture of the middle-class private home, Andrea Kaston Tange suggests that ‘[t]he notion of *good taste* as a middle-class birthright was repeatedly asserted as particularly useful for the purposes of drawing class boundaries’. See Andrea Kaston Tange, *Architectural Identities* (Toronto, Ont.; London: University of Toronto Press, 2010), p. 8. The discussion of workhouse architecture in terms of ‘taste’ constructs a middle-class reader and unsettles the boundary between domestic and public space.

¹¹⁴ Peter W. Sinnema, *Dynamics of the Pictured Page: Representing the Nation in the Illustrated London News* (Aldershot; Brookfield, Vt Ashgate, 1998), p. 34. Sinnema points out that, ‘[c]oexisting under the aegis of the illustrated periodical, forms such as the poem or the engraved picture are invariably redefined according to the way they are embedded in, or received as constituent parts of, the newspaper. In other words, their relative position to each other on the newspaper page specifies in part their artifactual use’. *Ibid.*

¹¹⁵ These highly illustrated periodicals are in contrast to the images discussed in *Figaro* or the *London Dispatch*, which were often the sole illustration featured.

News (fig. 25; 1859) on the page following its short textual description. The workhouse image is positioned below the portrait of the new governor general of Madras and above two illustrations that depict women modelling the fashionable clothing of the season. Divorced from its written description, the workhouse image must, to some extent, be read in dialogue with the other illustrations sharing the same page; a reader views the institution against the frills and fans of women and the stately colonial grandeur of the new governor.¹¹⁶ The proximity of the workhouse illustration to these other pieces of (literally) fashionable news implies that the new workhouse is also to be interpreted as a cultural and in *vogue* item of news. The written description of the house similarly enforces this idea of the building as an aesthetic object. It is described as being ‘Elizabethan in character’ and as presenting ‘a very cheerful appearance’.¹¹⁷ Although the text emphasises to readers that the building, like the Bridge and Herne union workhouses, is based upon a prison system design which prioritises surveillance, this news report is not meant to arouse any strong reactions from readers; they are invited to admire the façade of the grand building in the same way that they are invited to admire the clothing of the women. The workhouse has become in this instance an inherent part of Victorian social and cultural life that is implicitly aligned with the frivolity of fashion rather than the punishment of pauperism.

In the *Illustrated London News* report on the new Scarborough workhouse (fig. 26; 1860), value is once again placed upon the appearance of the workhouse; the text points out that the entrance gateway makes a ‘pleasing feature’ and that, ‘although the building, as a whole, is free from the expensive ornamental decoration that too often characterises similar establishments, it possesses, from the artistic mixture of brickwork, a most attractive and

¹¹⁶ Sinnema notes that, ‘as any reader of the press knows, frequently bizarre disparities between one column and its neighbour, between one picture and another on the same page are integral to its form’. See Sinnema, *Dynamics of the Pictured Page*, p. 34.

¹¹⁷ ‘The New Risbridge Union Workhouse’, *Illustrated London News*, 2 April 1859, p. 332.

substantial appearance'.¹¹⁸ The text seems at pains both to emphasise the frugality of the workhouse design and the pleasantness of its appearance: it must be thrifty so as not to entice paupers or waste public funds, but it must look attractive so as not to be an eye-sore for the people living around, or to suggest ideas of ill-treatment. The image shares the page with an illustration of the port of Tangier, which was resisting attacks from Spain at the time. The two contrasting pictures draw attention to the underlying ideologies that inform their pictorial representation. The image of Tangier emphasises the exoticness of the location: there are camels pictured in the scene, ruined architecture and people in local clothing. The swirls that make up the sky are suggestive of a heat haze. Set against this image of Tangier, the Scarborough workhouse represents a much more domestic and localised image. The workhouse seems part of the natural idyll of pastoral countryside and harmonises with the cottages, rolling hills, hedges and windmills of the image. By contrast to the sense of chaos implicit in the picture of Tangier, the workhouse represents a haven of order and control.

Workhouse buildings were also, in some instances, valued as historical edifices. Pre-1834 workhouses often had an air of Renaissance splendour about them that the architects of new workhouses in the mid-nineteenth century sought to capture. The King's Lynn union workhouse made the pages of the *Illustrated London News* (fig. 27; 1854) when it was reported that this building, formerly one of the most 'striking objects' in the town, had collapsed.¹¹⁹ The idea of the workhouse as an aesthetic object is suggested in the text by the description of it as a structure of 'archaeological interest' which possessed 'some claims to the picturesque'.¹²⁰ Describing the architectural features of the edifice, the focus of the article is explicitly upon its long history as a building, rather than on its function as a workhouse. The image depicts a pleasant, many-windowed building with a garden, in front of which two women stroll. Similarly to the illustrations of the Risbridge and Scarborough workhouses,

¹¹⁸ 'Scarborough New Workhouse', *Illustrated London News*, 18 February 1860, p. 156.

¹¹⁹ 'The King's Lynn Union Workhouse', *Illustrated London News*, 2 September 1854, p. 209.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

this image also implicitly gains meanings from its positioning on the page. The illustration of the workhouse is positioned in the top right hand corner of the page; taking up the same amount of space in the bottom right hand corner is a depiction of St Ninian's Church and, mid-way down the page, on the left, is an image of a castle.¹²¹ The images are intended to be read individually as historic examples of admirable British architecture. The surrounding texts implicitly associate the institution with sites of cultural and historical importance, dispelling uncomfortable associations of poverty and grief.

As well as popular newspapers like the *Illustrated London News*, workhouse designs were also published in special interest periodicals like the *Builder*. Over the course of the century, this architectural publication included numerous illustrations of new workhouses, or extensions to existing buildings. Though intended for a readership with a professional interest in architecture, these pictured designs have the same latent ideological meanings as the images that appeared in non-specialist publications. The images in the *Builder*, which usually picture the workhouse complex from a birds'-eye-view perspective on a full or double-page spread, give information about the planning and construction of these buildings. As well as large illustrations of the exterior, reports in the *Builder* on recently built or planned workhouses usually include the additional feature of a labelled floor plan on a separate page.¹²² These floor plans are designed to be read alongside the image of the workhouse and written article, allowing interested readers to scrutinise both the interior and exterior design of the edifice. In the case of the St Luke's Workhouse (1879), the interior floor plan is

¹²¹ Similarly, the illustration 'City of London Union House' in the *Lady's Newspaper*, discussed earlier, is positioned on the same page as an image of a castle and a description of a Roman theatre. On the preceding page, an article on 'lessons in principles of art' instructs readers on how to draw objects with realistic perspective. Having read these 'lessons', readers turning to the image of the workhouse may well have paid attention to the perspective of the building, reading it, as it were, as an aesthetic example of how to draw. 'Lessons in the Principles of Art.— No. 3.', *Lady's Newspaper*, 13 April 1850, p. 208.

¹²² The Bow-road workhouse was pictured in the *Builder* on 11 August 1849, but the corresponding floor plan was not included until 25 August 1849. Similarly to the previous images of the Bow workhouse, the edifice is pictured as if viewed from across the street. A horse and carriage, and a man on horseback are pictured in the street. See 'The City of London Union Workhouse', *Builder*, 11 August 1849, pp. 378-379 and 'The City of London Union Workhouse', *Builder*, 25 August 1849, p. 400.

pictured below the diagram of the exterior on the same page, creating for the viewer the impression of being able to dissect the interior and exterior simultaneously. The focus of these written reports is upon the cost of the building, the skilful design, and the interplay between architectural feature and intended purpose; they place emphasis upon how the plan allows for the classification and supervision of inmates. The skilful architectural design implies the expert treatment of the poor inside the house: the science of the architecture suggests a science of managing poverty.

The images attain a sense of factuality and realism from their publication in this niche-interest architectural magazine, but they are, in essence, as much ideological constructs as any of those that appeared in more popular publications. Several of the published images are designs for workhouses that had not yet been built, and which were still very much an architect's vision of how the building would look, rather than the actual end product. The implicit aim of the illustrations is to create a sense of grandeur. The designs featured in the *Builder* are all impressive structures; set in their own grounds, they have the appearance of country houses or self-contained towns. In particular, the isometric view of the Birmingham new workhouse, which was published with a labelled plan of the interior and a short written article (fig. 28; 1852), is similar to the designs published in the *Illustrated London News*. Readers are meant to admire the sophisticated and expensive architectural design that is so different from the earlier prison designs: the elaborate workhouse complex cost 'about 29,000*l.*, exclusive of fixtures, furniture, and fittings' to build.¹²³ The pictorial detail of the children playing around a swing in a yard enclosed by fences recalls the children at play in the image of the Fulham and Hammersmith workhouse in the *Illustrated London News*. Once again, this detail suggests to viewers that this is an institution that does not apply a disciplinary regime to the old or young inmates. As readers are informed that the workhouse

¹²³ 'Birmingham New Workhouse', *Builder*, 31 January 1852, pp. 71-73 (p. 71).

is not yet open to occupants, the playing children are, as in the *Illustrated London News* article, purely symbolic; they draw attention to a conscious effort in the image to represent a relaxing of the workhouse test. Harmonising with the image of the playing children, the written text describes the children's wards as an 'asylum', suggesting the need to distance these quarters from the punitive associations of the workhouse.¹²⁴ Together, the written and visual texts intend to elicit readers' admiration for these buildings, constructing an impression of an institution that is well-regulated and controlled.

Many of the isometric workhouse designs in the *Builder* picture small figures in the scene, as in the earlier architectural images discussed. Aside from the occasional inclusion of playing children, most of these figures are respectable members of the public rather than inmates of the workhouse. In the double page spread of the infirm wards of St Luke's workhouse (fig. 29; 1870), several well-dressed figures, including a mother and two small children are depicted standing in the street before the building. In the illustration of Lambeth New workhouse (fig. 30; 1874), these well-to-do figures are particularly prominent. A mother and young daughter are depicted on the left of the image, stood near two gentlemen deep in conversation. Further to the right, a man and woman stand in conversation before the building. As in the previous images discussed, the depiction of these figures adds a layer of bourgeois propriety to the scene and the image of the workhouse is filtered through the middle-class values implicitly associated with them.

Unusually for the workhouse reports in the *Builder*, a wood-engraved illustration of an interior (fig. 31; 1886), with images of the floor plan and exterior, is included in the report on the Holborn union workhouse. The written text describes the interior layout of the workhouse and the practical details of cost, heating and water supplies. The reader's attention is directed to the illustration of the workhouse dining hall, which is also described as

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

doubling as the chapel. The high, vaulted ceilings and rafters suggest the loftiness of the room and construct a sense of the structure as a magnificent ecclesiastical space that is in keeping with the sophisticated exterior façade; the image is shaped like an arched window which gives the viewer the impression of peering into a church building. In the front of the hall, two men are in conversation and, on the left of the image, a man talks with a figure sitting in one of the pews. The doubling of the workhouse dining hall as a chapel suggests that, in a time of increasing secularism, the twin state apparatuses of religion and poor relief, both mechanisms of control over the working classes, have become entwined.¹²⁵ While Pugin's text suggests that the workhouse is adrift from the church, this design shows how religious space has become incorporated into a state institution.

Old Salisbury workhouse (fig. 32; 1881) is pictured in the *Builder* not as a building that has recently been completed, but as an historic structure, which, like the King's Lynn workhouse, is of historical and cultural importance. The accompanying text describes how this building, which had served as a workhouse until three years previously, is being threatened with demolition to accommodate the widening of a road. The written text describes the fifteenth-century workhouse as a 'curious and interesting old building'.¹²⁶ The focus of the text is upon the original features of the house that make it worthy of public interest, rather than upon how its design facilitates its purpose as a workhouse. The text describes how the doors are 'valuable examples of Perpendicular panelling' and points out that the oriel window 'forms a pretty feature'.¹²⁷ The text estimates that other of the workhouse buildings were built between the reigns of James I and Charles II: '[t]hey are

¹²⁵ The workhouse dining hall also functioned as a chapel in many other workhouses.

¹²⁶ 'Old Salisbury Workhouse Threatened with Demolition', *Builder*, 4 June 1881, p. 698. Images on pp. [700], [709].

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*

remarkably picturesque, and the grouping of gables, chimneys, and roofs, all crowned by the distant spire of the cathedral, makes up a very pretty picture'.¹²⁸

As well as being an aesthetically pleasing prospect, the workhouse is rendered an object of mystery; describing a curious opening between the gable of the kitchen and the wall of the hall, the text points out that '[w]hat this curious feature can have been it is at present difficult to conjecture. [...] When the brickwork with which it is at present blocked up is removed the difficulty may be solved'.¹²⁹ The illustration of the workhouse exterior depicts the façade of the old building. Set amongst trees and next to the river, the building has the appearance of being an old manor house. Prominent in the scene is a bridge across the river, on which two figures are discernable; while one looks over the bridge towards the house, the other figure carries a basket upon his or her head, a detail more suggestive of rustic peasant life in an earlier century than late-nineteenth century life in the city. The quaint building represented in the image seems to speak to a nostalgic representation of history. In addition to the drawing of the exterior, another page includes three separate illustrations of parts of the same workhouse building. The top illustration depicts the courtyard of the workhouse, the second box includes five vignettes of interesting architectural features, and the third shows an interior room of the workhouse. The images and vignettes are numbered and a key provided with the written article directs readers' attention to the points of historical interest, creating for them the sense of knowing the building and gaining access to the past. In this article the former workhouse is a site of cultural importance and its function as an institution for the poor is incidental.

Published near the end of the century, *Knight's Guide to the Arrangement and Construction of Workhouse Buildings* (1889) discusses the architectural deficiencies of purpose-built workhouse buildings in the 1830s and subsequent progress in their design. The

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

discussion of the improving architecture implies a changing mode of treatment for the poor, and a shift from the ideology of less eligibility, to one that promulgates the health and welfare of the paupers. Referring to Lewis Vulliamy, who is described as being ‘one of the most refined classic architects’ of the age, the text points out that, as well as designing many grand buildings, he also provided plans for workhouses.¹³⁰ This cross-over between domestic homes for the rich and institutions for the poor suggests the slippage of architectural and ideological boundaries between the private home and the workhouse. Significantly, the text refers to one particular workhouse, which was ‘required to be designed with special regard to external appearance, as it was visible from Sion House, the seat of the Duke of Northumberland, and a wish had been expressed that the building should not be, in any sense, an eye-sore’.¹³¹ The thought of an ugly symbol of destitution overlooking his estate, and visible to the household and guests, was clearly an uncomfortable prospect for this titled member of the social elite. The request (and its mention in a guide for architects) draws attention to the social politics inscribed on the workhouse walls. An attractive exterior potentially enabled the Duke and his household to forget the function of the new building and the close proximity of the indigent poor. More implicitly, a pleasing workhouse façade might also have gone some way towards neutralising any sense of public dissatisfaction with the treatment of the poor and the distribution of wealth in society; a gratifying appearance may have prevented the surrounding population from drawing too great a contrast between the homes of the social elite and the shelter offered to paupers.

Picturing Pauper Life

¹³⁰ *Knight's Guide to the Arrangement and Construction of Workhouse Buildings, with Notes and Diagrams and Recommendations of the Local Government Board, in regard to the Erection of Poor Law Institutions* (London: Knight & Co., 1889), p. 6.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

Beyond including a labelled floor plan of the interior, or an occasional glimpse inside a dining hall, architectural images usually show little interest in depicting the inner spaces of new workhouses. The paupers living within the walls are conspicuously absent in most of these images, which depict instead middle-class observers outside the building. These images covertly imply that the reader does not need to see inside the walls to know what the space contains. In other forms of visual representation, however, the focus is upon supposedly realistic depictions of the paupers who inhabit the interior spaces of the workhouse. By contrast to the scathing attacks of the caricatures, or the eerie semi-circles of paupers described in numerous visiting accounts, many of these images picture the workhouse wards as pleasant environments in which the poor are happy, clean and well cared for by a state that provides for them. These texts seem to extend the agenda of the architectural images that praise the modernity of the new workhouses and imply that a pleasant exterior equals a pleasant interior; picturing the indoor space, these texts suggest to viewers a comforting vision of life within the workhouses.

In 'Notes of a Union Chaplain' (1859-1860), published in the one penny *Sunday at Home*, the description of the Cheriton union workhouse is mediated through the narration of the workhouse chaplain. As suggested in the architectural images, in this series the ideological apparatuses of religion and poor relief begin to collapse into one another. At a time of increasing secularism, 'Notes of a Union Chaplain' emphasises the effect that religion still has in improving the characters of the workhouse inmates and moulding them into compliant subjects. Each instalment focuses upon a particular incident and is accompanied by an illustration that is usually positioned on the front cover and which precedes the written text. The illustrations privilege a particular moment from the written narrative, suggesting its significance and shaping readers' expectations of the text to follow. The static images of the workhouse and its paupers offer a comforting representation of the institution, depicting

scenes within the school, infirmary, board room and gardens, as well as pauper inmates helping out in the fields. Moments unconnected to the workhouse are characterised by chaos and disharmony. Amongst others, these external scenes depict a fire, warfare in the trenches, a dying widow and her weeping children, a circus crowd and injured player, and a husband deserting his wife. Over the course of the instalments, the images subliminally reinforce for readers a representation of the house as a safe and ordered environment for the needy poor that contrasts with the disorder of the wider world.

Integral to both text and image in ‘Notes of a Union Chaplain’ is the promulgation of Christian ideology. The overt religious inflections of the written text are conveyed in the images by the figure of the chaplain, who is visualised in many of the workhouse illustrations. In the majority of these pictures he stands with his arm outstretched and palm raised, a stance that is suggestive of religious charity and of his role as facilitator of the scene. In the first instalment of the series, the written text describes a tour around the whole institution, but the illustration (fig. 33) chooses to depict a single moment in the workhouse school: the chaplain describes in the text how the children’s ‘bright eyes twinkled as I talked about the infant Jesus, and whenever I asked a question concerning his work and nature, a dozen hands were eagerly thrust out for the reply’.¹³² In the school room illustration, the chaplain is depicted in the far left of the scene, holding out his hand towards a clustered semicircle of happy children. With their hands out-stretched, the children mimic the pose of the chaplain, and are implicitly aligned with this Christian figure. In the written text, the chaplain notes that the school ‘seemed more like a large family than an assemblage of strangers’ and this description is similarly played out in the image.¹³³ The scene recalls that of ‘An Afternoon in a Workhouse’, analysed in chapter three; the children look sweet and well looked after and the school master and mistress look pleasant and thoroughly respectable.

¹³² ‘Notes of a Union Chaplain. “By the author of My Dark Days.” Chapter I. My Scene of Labour’, *Sunday at Home*, 20 October 1859, pp. 657-659 (p. 658).

¹³³ *Ibid.*

Around the schoolroom, biblical hangings suggest the sense of the schoolroom as a religious space, an impression that is reinforced in ‘Carry in her Corner’ (fig. 34) an illustration to a later instalment. In this illustration a little girl, named Carry, is depicted in the now empty school room, reading psalms in the light from the window. The serenity of Carry is juxtaposed with the busy schoolyard seen through the open door, through which two playful-looking girls peer in at the chaplain and Carry. Her name has symbolic resonance, seated as she is below a sign that reads ‘he shall carry the lambs in his bosom’. The doubling of ‘carry’ in this scriptural extract constructs the little girl as a lamb to be carried back to Jesus and anticipates her death, which takes place in this instalment. As the focal point of the picture, the Christian figure of the chaplain is meant to have a comforting effect on readers.

In this series, adults, as well as children, receive a religious upbringing. The representation of the workhouse as a space of religious education is most overt in chapter 9, which is headed by an engraving titled ‘Bible Reading in the Female Ward’ (fig. 35; 1859). The written text describes the chaplain’s eventual success setting up a workhouse bible reading group in which, after several struggles, even the most unruly paupers engage with the scripture lessons.¹³⁴ The image depicts a group of pauper women clustered around the bed of a woman who reads from the bible. At the end of the bed, one woman cups her hand to her ear in her eagerness to hear the reading. On the wall is a sign that reads ‘Cheriton Union Scripture lessons’, providing a clue to viewers as to the subject of the written instalment to follow. To the readers of the *Sunday at Home*, the image of the bible reading offers a comforting association of the poor with religion, suggesting that the workhouse has become a site of Christian faith for even the most heathenish of the paupers.

¹³⁴ ‘Notes of a Union Chaplain. Chapter XI. The Church in the Workhouse.’, *Sunday at Home*, 29 December 1859, pp. [817]-820 (p. 819). As the written narrative points out, readers should not suppose that this workhouse is exceptional because the instances that he selects to tell are ‘amongst the most encouraging’ and there was an ‘undercurrent of sin and worldliness so strong as to render our work there quite as much a struggle as elsewhere’. *Ibid.*, p. 817. The Chaplain acknowledges that the representation constructed of the workhouse is a selective one. The images are examples of this selective story telling.

As well as signalling to readers that the spiritual condition of the poor is being attended to, the images in ‘Notes of a Union Chaplain’ also suggest to readers a shift in the function of the workhouse; rather than disciplining the poor in an institutional setting, the image suggests that the focus is now upon caring for the bodies and souls of the poor in a domestic environment. In the second chapter, the image ‘John Tremlin tells the Story of his Life’ (fig. 36; 1859) depicts a man conversing with the chaplain in the workhouse infirmary. Though the rules hanging above the bed remind readers that this is a workhouse, the scene is generally a pleasant one. John sits propped up by pillows in a comfortable bed and no other paupers or beds are depicted within the ward. A walking stick leans against the bed frame and, on a box next to his bed are a mug, plate and the chaplain’s hat. The religious inflection of the image is apparent in the bible pictured upon the windowsill. Significantly, the window is positioned low enough to enable a person to see out and a large geranium, described in the written text as the pauper’s pride and joy, is next to the bible. Overall, the image creates the illusion that this could be a scene set within a domestic cottage bedroom; the pictorial details suggest that the emphasis of this representation falls upon the care and comfort offered to the sick and old.

The construction of the workhouse as domestic space rather than state institution is played out in ‘Rebecca visited by an old Pupil’ (fig. 37; 1860) in chapter five of the second series. The image depicts a bed-ridden young woman being visited by the chaplain and a female friend with her small child, who proffers a bunch of flowers. Rebecca is a good Christian woman who has ended up in the workhouse because of the onset of paralysis. While the text emphasises the pathos of her story, describing how, during this visit, ‘large tears [...] fell fast from her eyes’, the image is unequivocally a happy one.¹³⁵ The bed in which Rebecca lies looks comfortable and her shawl does not have the appearance of being a workhouse

¹³⁵ ‘Notes of a Union Chaplain. Second Series. By the Author of “My Dark Days.” Chapter V. – Rebecca’, *Sunday at Home*, 2 August 1860, pp. [481]-484 (p. 483).

uniform. Outside the large window a view of the rolling countryside surrounding the workhouse is visible. If the written text did not situate this scene within the workhouse, the image might instead be interpreted as depicting the interior of a domestic cottage.

In many accounts of the workhouse, particularly the satirical texts discussed earlier, the institution is firmly associated with the destruction of families. In ‘Notes of a Union Chaplain’, however, the workhouse actually becomes a stage for the happy reunion of a husband (an inmate) and his estranged wife.¹³⁶ Three chapters narrate the story of the injured performer, a profligate who deserted his wife to become a player in a circus, before ending up lame in the workhouse. In a mission to reunite the repentant player with his long-suffering wife, the chaplain seeks out this woman and the couple’s happy reunion is illustrated in the image for chapter 9 of the first series (fig. 38; 1859). The chaplain is centralised in the image, standing between the husband and wife, who flies eagerly towards her husband with outstretched arms. The chaplain’s gesture towards the seated man again suggests his role as facilitator of this scene. In the far left of the image, a smiling woman, possibly the matron, looks on happily at this joyous meeting. By contrast to the images of brutal separation in the *Penny Satirist* and *Figaro*, this illustration represents the institution as the stage for a scene of domestic reconciliation.

This focus on the family is similarly apparent in the instalment ‘Christmas Day in the Workhouse’ discussed previously. The image (fig. 39; 1859) depicts a Christmas dinner in the workhouse, with men, women and children all intermingled and crowded happily around a generously-spread table. The meal is presided over by the paternal figure of the master who, in the background of the image, performs the fatherly duty of carving the meat. Also visualised in the scene is the amicable chaplain himself. The scene represented is comfortingly familial and the hall is more reminiscent of a crowded home than an echoing

¹³⁶ The narrative is, of course, published in a magazine that explicitly signals its concern with the familial unit in its title.

workhouse hall. The focus on the workhouse as a family home represents a fantasy of paternal care that is in direct contrast to the satirical caricatures and the accounts of abusive masters. Although the image depicts a pleasing tableau of Christmas cheer, the written narrative draws attention to the transitory nature of this happy scene. Noting that the ‘stern regulation [of separation] is suspended for the day’, the chaplain expresses his pleasure at seeing families reunited: ‘[v]ery pleasant it is to see that husband and wife sitting together; that poor widow with her two little girls, one on each side of her; and that young woman so tenderly administering to her aged and infirm mother’.¹³⁷ The static image works to preserve for readers the joyous family meal and contains none of the pathos implicit in the written text.

By contrast to the happy family scene pictured in the Christmas instalment, the image for the chapter ‘The Way to the Workhouse’ (fig. 40) represents a wretched family hoping to be given out-door and medical relief at the workhouse. The impoverished woman is depicted crouched by a stream, while her two boys stand in it collecting water cresses. In comparison to the well-presented workhouse inmates pictured in previous instalments, the woman and two boys look degraded in their poverty. Read against the scenes of the workhouse interior, the image sends a subliminal message to viewers that life inside the workhouse for the destitute poor is far preferable to scrabbling for survival outside it. The written text suggests the woman’s error in her aversion to admitting her family as inmates; as the chaplain points out, if she can get ‘wholesome food and kind nursing, with good medical advice’ in the workhouse, then she should look upon it as a ‘blessing’.¹³⁸ In this openly moralising narrative, the text reveals that the family have been brought to the workhouse because of the persistent drunkenness and indolence of both husband and wife; the chaplain informs readers

¹³⁷ ‘Notes of a Union Chaplain. Chapter X. Christmas Day in the Workhouse’, *Sunday at Home*, 22 December 1859, pp. [801]-804 (p. 802).

¹³⁸ ‘Notes of a Union Chaplain. Second Series. By the Author of “My Dark Days.” Chapter V. – The Way to the Workhouse’, *Sunday at Home*, 26 July 1860, pp. [465]-468 (p. 466).

that he has selected this instance because ‘it carries with it a solemn warning and moral’.¹³⁹

At the same time as the instalments offer a comforting representation of the workhouse to middle-class readers, this penny publication simultaneously warns its poorer and younger readers about the consequences of idleness.

The images discussed in this chapter thus far are almost all illustrations in periodicals or newspapers. However, the workhouse setting was also taken up by artists as a subject for easel painting. Though separated from ‘Notes of a Union Chaplain’ in terms of mode of representation and by more than two decades, James Charles’s painting *Our Poor: A Bible Reading, Chelsea Workhouse* (fig. 41; 1878) has a similar agenda. The scene is a familiar one: the workhouse is again a site of religious edification with female paupers depicted reading together from the bible. This workhouse interior is not far removed from a pleasant domestic kitchen or parlour; only the uniforms of the women signal the institutional setting. Unlike the perpetual whitewash associated with the workhouse, the lower walls of this room are painted yellow, and give a sense of cheer to the room and the painting. Pictorial symbols in the image construct the room as a pleasant environment in which the paupers can spend their leisure time: framed pictures hang upon the walls; there is a shelf containing books; a pink flower sits in a vase on a side board; the large, low, window casts the room in light; the windowsill boasts green pot plants; a teapot, cups and a newspaper are visible on the wooden table; and the benches upon which the women sit have backs and arms. Overall, the tone is one of relaxed comfort: the woman on the left in the forefront leans back and rests her foot on a stool while sipping tea. Meanwhile, a smiling woman near the window seems to be in conversation with the woman next to her. The painting implies a different treatment of the poor than that implied by earlier satirical illustrations; the representation of a comfortable

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 468.

room for the paupers again suggests the idea that the emphasis in society has shifted towards caring for the poor, rather than punishing them for their poverty.

In the painting, the viewer's eye is drawn to the figure of a little blonde girl. Dressed in a pink dress and offering a bunch of flowers to a young woman, the girl is sentimentalised and distanced from suggestions of pauperism and its implications. The flowers associate the girl with natural beauty and suggest her freedom to play in the gardens. That the little girl is pictured within this interior at all suggests the relaxation of the stringent rules of separation that kept children and adults apart. Rather than contemplating the pathos of this child's pauperism, viewers of the painting are instead invited to admire her as an image of healthy, happy childhood. The painting is devoid of any suggestions of contamination that are so prominent in literature about the treatment of workhouse girls. Viewers are not meant to contemplate the hardships and deprivations suffered by this child before and after her admittance to the institution, or to consider what the future may hold for her as a workhouse girl. The painting represents a single suspended moment in time and, unlike 'Notes of a Union Chaplain', the harmony of the scene is not disrupted by any corresponding written text. The title of the painting, *Our Poor*, is an implicit social statement, which conveys a sense of familial ties between the viewer and the poor. Suggesting that the middle and upper classes have a responsibility of care towards the poor and that the lower tiers of society need the patronage of their social betters, the painting constructs the viewer as a privileged member of the middle-class ranks; it functions subliminally to reassure readers that their poor are well looked after.

Our Poor and the illustrations of 'Notes of a Union Chaplain' construct a cheering visual representation of the workhouse. That these are deliberate constructs, however, is suggested by a reading of the two versions of the same workhouse scene by Hubert Von Herkomer. The first version, titled 'Old Age – A Study at the Westminster Union' (fig. 42;

1877), is an engraving published on a double spread in the *Graphic*, a magazine known for its social realist illustrations. The image, which gains impact from its position across two pages, depicts the elderly women's ward of the Westminster union workhouse. The room itself is very large, bare and sparsely furnished. Wooden floorboards elongate the room and create an overall impression of emptiness and desolation. The high-set window recalls debates about windows in anti-Poor Law discussion and, by contrast to *Our Poor*, suggests the subjection of the elderly women to a disciplinary regime. In the forefront of the image, pauper women are depicted at work, sewing clothes and cutting up cloth. Although pictures hang on the walls around the room, the scene is, on the whole, a bleak one. One sitting woman stares vacantly into space, while another appears to gaze forlornly out of the picture at the viewer as if silently appealing to them to ease her suffering. Between her hands she holds a length of taut thread, a detail suggestive of her thread of life and inevitable fate to remain in the workhouse for the rest of her days. In the background of the image, other pauper women are depicted sitting around a long table on backless benches, listless and seemingly unemployed.

The corresponding written text in the *Graphic*, titled 'Aged Women in a London Workhouse', is equivocal in its expression of sympathy for the inmates depicted in Herkomer's image. The text suggests that,

[t]he scene is a sad one, yet not altogether without its alleviations. Many of these old people are not quite friendless. They have relations and acquaintances, whom they go to see on Sundays and holidays.¹⁴⁰

The text attempts to soften the harsh impression that viewers may form of the image, suggesting the unseen comforts that the paupers enjoy. The idea of blame is still very much apparent in this text: although it points out that '[a] woman may be a pattern of industry and frugality, and yet still be dragged down to pauperism by a bad husband', it also acknowledges that 'it must be admitted that a good many of the women who have to seek parish relief in

¹⁴⁰ 'Our Illustrations', 'Aged Women in a London Workhouse', *Graphic*, 7 April 1877, pp. 326-327 (p. 326).

their declining days have themselves to blame for it'.¹⁴¹ By contrast, Herkomer's own words about his picture, quoted by the *Graphic*, offer a far more sympathetic interpretation of the workhouse scene:

These poor old bodies formed a most touching picture. Work they would, for industry was still in them; but it was often most childish work – still it *was* work. The agony of threading their needles was affecting indeed.¹⁴²

Herkomer's words suggest that he was attempting to convey a more emotionally-charged scene than allowed for in the *Graphic*'s discussion. Overall, his image constructs a gloomy rendition of workhouse life for the elderly.

The following year, 'Old Age' was reworked into an oil painting and renamed *Eventide: A Scene in the Westminster Union* (fig. 43; 1878). The renaming of the picture is suggestive of the conscious re-touching of the dismal image into something that suggests a more comfortable, and comforting, version of workhouse life.¹⁴³ The word 'eventide', with its connotations of twilight, is a romanticised dressing up of 'old age'; in the painting, the engraving's 'study' of a named workhouse ward, and the factual and objective implications associated with this, is transformed into an implicitly fictionalised 'scene'. The medium of paint, rather than black and white engraving, automatically gives the picture a brighter feel, but some key details have also been added to create a more idealised view of workhouse life. At the forefront of the scene, a teacup, saucer and teapot are placed on a stool next to a pauper woman. The table, previously bare apart from the women's sewing, now boasts a white vase with colourful flowers. In the far left of the image, the domestic detail of a black

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, pp. 326-327.

¹⁴³ In his discussion of *Eventide*, Lee MacCormick Edwards notes that it 'was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1878 and at the Paris Salon in 1879. While it was warmly received in Paris, its reception at the Royal Academy exhibition was less favourable, and the slum context was generally ignored. [...] Blackburn's *Academy Notes* opined that the artist had depicted "happy and comfortable old age [...]"'. See Lee MacCormick Edwards, *Herkomer: A Victorian Artist* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), p. 78. Peter Higginbotham suggests that the workhouse appears 'a comfortable and social environment, despite the poverty'. See Peter Higginbotham, 'Workhouse Literature and Arts', *The Workhouse*. Available online at: <http://www.workhouses.org.uk/> [accessed 15 December 2013].

cat has been added. The woman who sits staring into space in 'Old Age' now sits holding a book. A young woman has also been introduced into the scene and stands cutting up the material for the older women to sew; as well as making the painting more aesthetically pleasing, her presence also suggests the care of the elderly. The viewer's eye is drawn to the figure of a woman on the right who has a cheery, ruddy face and smiles out of the painting, holding up her mug and bowl. Unlike *Oliver Twist's* anarchic gesture with his bowl and spoon, this woman's gesture does not seem to suggest any lack of food, but rather indicates her contentment with her allowance. Though there is still pathos to the scene, it is now more domestic and homely than in 'Old Age'.¹⁴⁴ The transformation of the workhouse image into an aesthetic artwork suggests a need to represent the poor as being appropriately cared for. It also suggests a commercial aspect to the scene that is implicit in the change of genres from an illustrated newspaper associated with social realism to easel painting. The different mode of representation implies that the painting has a different agenda and audience.

Interest in the paupers, rather than the building in which they lived, is demonstrated by two articles published in the *Illustrated London News* by the same title of 'Sketches in a London Workhouse'. The first article, included on 2 March 1889, is accompanied by four vignettes of individual paupers and the second, published the following week, is accompanied by three vignettes of paupers (figs. 44-45). The opening of the first article invokes a representation of London as a huge metropolis, now increasingly populated by migrants from different parts of the country. Because of this influx of people, the text points out that 'out-door relief becomes difficult to regulate with justice and prudence, so little being known of

¹⁴⁴ Overall, Edwards offers a gloomier reading of *Eventide* than that of my own. Referring to this painting, he writes that, '[t]he dark flat forms of two figures that seem to be shuffling forward, their heads outlined by an eerie light sifting into the room from the window above them, cast long, symbol-laden shadows. [...] [T]he plunging perspective accentuates their disquieting proximity and the larger message of the old women's deprivation and loneliness'. See Edwards, *Herkomer*, p. 77. Comparative to *Old Age*, however, *Eventide* undoubtedly offers a pleasanter version of workhouse life.

the actual circumstances of strangers in London'.¹⁴⁵ The second article similarly imagines London as a chaotic whirlwind of people and buildings, suggesting that 'Old Londoners, as well as strangers in this huge congeries of human dwellings or lodgings, may in a few years be utterly lost in London'.¹⁴⁶ While both texts initially construct a sense of the transient and shifting body of a city that is populated by foreigners, the first article suggests that the 'real Londoners admitted into the workhouses are more easily identified'.¹⁴⁷ This text suggests that '[s]pecimens of various orders of society, in a fallen and despoiled plight, still fond of explaining that they "have seen better days," may be found in some workhouse wards'.¹⁴⁸ The description of these London paupers as 'specimens' that can be 'found' and 'identified' recalls the language of scientific writings and constructs a sense of the paupers as creatures of scientific interest. The text draws attention to some of the types of pauper inmates ('the unthrifty tradesman, the credulous speculator, the careless sporting gentleman') and, referring to the sketches, suggests that '[e]ach of the figures delineated by our Artist is that of a man who could tell the story of his life'.¹⁴⁹

These 'sketches', which take up a full page of the newspaper, purport to be faithful representations of the pauper men. Beneath the sketched figures are written labels, which identify each in turn as 'One who has seen better days', 'A Reduced Tradesman', 'An Old Soldier of Balaklava' and 'An Old Australian Squatter'. This labelling of the paupers recalls the labelling of architectural diagrams of the workhouse. The sense of categorisation is enforced by the position of these figures in separate spaces that do not overlap; that the paupers are not named, and are assigned to a type, suggests a sense of them as representatives of a particular genus of pauper. The men in the images look out of the page at the reader, inviting him or her to scrutinise their faces and to guess the stories behind them. By contrast

¹⁴⁵ 'Sketches in a London Workhouse', *Illustrated London News*, 2 March 1889, pp. 278-279 (p. 278).

¹⁴⁶ 'Sketches in a London Workhouse', *Illustrated London News*, 9 March 1889, p. 299.

¹⁴⁷ 'Sketches in a London Workhouse', 2 March 1889, p. 278.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

to the description of the fast growing metropolis, the images reassure the reader by their static focus on the individual; the text constructs a tension between the vastness of London, made up of strangers, and the assurance that the domestic (London) poor, can be still be recognised.

The second article invokes a gratifying and reassuring representation of the workhouse for readers, pointing out that ‘it is satisfactory to know that thousands of poor old men and women are properly cared for, and that boys and girls are taught to earn an honest living, at the public expense’.¹⁵⁰ The text is accompanied by three sketches of pauper inmates; the first vignette, centralised on the page at the top of the image, depicts two elderly pauper women sitting together, one of whom reads from a book. The caption, ‘Old Friends’, below the image adds readings of companionship and comfort. The image in the bottom left of the page is captioned ‘A Home Ruler’. The sketch to the right of this, which is captioned ‘Contented’, depicts an elderly woman sitting in a chair with her feet upon a stool. This vignette gives visual expression to the assertion in the text that ‘[t]he elderly women [are] contented with a quiet place of refuge from sore trials and troubles’.¹⁵¹ Referring to the natures of the pauper inmates, the text points out that ‘[s]ome have read and thought a great deal, and like discussing the affairs of the nation, the question of Irish Home Rule, the merits of bimetallism, or theological and philosophical doctrines’.¹⁵² The incongruity between the ‘distinguished champions’ of global politics and their silent visual representation as elderly, disempowered paupers lightly pokes fun at these figures and invokes a sense of affection towards them.¹⁵³ The written text seems to privilege the images and their power to speak for themselves, stating that ‘[w]e will leave the expressive faces and figures delineated in the Sketches to tell their own tales of the past and present to readers already somewhat

¹⁵⁰ ‘Sketches in a London Workhouse’, *Illustrated London News*, 9 March 1889, p. 299.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

acquainted with the habits of the poor'.¹⁵⁴ The idea that these types of paupers are known to those who are familiar with the lower classes suggests that the written description is not necessary: readers can read their histories in their faces. The written text implies a bourgeois philanthropic reader who is flatteringly knowledgeable about the poor. These images suggest that, even at a time of massive social change, the poor can still be quantified into particular types and the mass body of pauperism can still be ordered and contained within the workhouse.

The workhouse images discussed in this chapter resonate with social and political ideologies. Appearing against the backdrop of Chartism, the anti-workhouse caricatures that proliferated in the aftermath of the 1834 New Poor Law had an overtly political agenda. They sought to incite public opposition to the union workhouses by melodramatically exaggerating the abuses associated with these Poor Law 'Bastilles'. Other texts sought a more realistic mode of representation through which to criticise the workhouses; several images depict the workhouse exterior and comment upon its prison-like façade. Later architectural images demonstrate the transformation that came about in workhouse design. Rather than seeking to unsettle a viewer, the depictions of the grand workhouse façades that circulated in the mid-nineteenth century aimed instead to instil in a viewer a sense of the order and magnificence of a modern England, a state now dominated by a growing middle class. A similarly comforting message is promulgated by images of workhouse interiors, which reassured viewers that the poor were being appropriately cared for by the state. Far from being apolitical, these pleasant images of workhouse life are implicitly politicised by their representation of a controversial

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

state institution. Though many of these visual texts appeared in periodicals that would have reached a wide audience, the images imply a reading public who are not themselves threatened with pauperism. As the conception of poverty changed across the century to place more emphasis on the role of social circumstance in creating destitution, representations of impressive exteriors and pleasant interiors seem to have worked to dispel the uncomfortable idea of a state institution that starved and punished the bodies of the poor.¹⁵⁵ The various trends in representation draw attention to the idea of the workhouse as a cultural construction that shifts throughout the century in response to social feeling. These images suggest the changing representation of the institution across the century as it evolved from a disciplinary penitentiary for the able-bodied to an asylum for the elderly.

¹⁵⁵ Gertrude Himmelfarb points out that, in the late-nineteenth century, ‘the focus upon “poverty” rather than the “poor” [...] had the effect of moving the discussion from the subjective realm of persons to the objective condition that defined them. The emphasis thus shifted from the personal characteristics of the poor—their particular circumstances, characters, habits—to the impersonal causes of poverty: the state of the economy, the structure of society, the action (or inaction) of government, the institutions and forces affecting social conditions and relations’. See Gertrude Himmelfarb, *Poverty and Compassion: The Moral Imagination of the Late Victorians* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), p. 102.

Conclusion

Workhouse representations were a part of everyday life in the nineteenth century. They appeared in newspapers and in magazines, in the ballads that were sold in the street, in print shops, art galleries and on the stage. Bound up as they are with nineteenth century life and culture, it is surprising that so little scholarly attention has been paid to this distinct body of representation. The aim of this research project has been to redress this gap in nineteenth-century studies and to shed new light on the cultural history of a unique institution. By collating and analysing examples of the numerous texts that circulated, this thesis has sought to demonstrate the significance of workhouse representations.

What has emerged from this study is that no definitive or coherent representation of the workhouse exists. Rather, like culture itself, the overall construction of the workhouse is unstable, shifting and contradictory. Each chapter has analysed a different strand of representation and has drawn attention to some of the various mythologies that surrounded this institution and which were constructed and shaped by culture. As the project has demonstrated, it is the social, political and cultural ideas implicit in the various representations that make them so meaningful to scholarly discussion. Representations of the workhouse are at pains to advocate particular ideas, both manifest and covert, about this contentious institution and society more generally. Many of them are flagrantly political (for example, the anti-Poor Law caricatures), seeking to mobilise the masses to denounce the workhouse and its authorities. By contrast, other texts are inscribed with more subtle, yet no less political ideologies: ideas of dirt and cleanliness, for instance, are shown to be state apparatuses that act to keep the poor in their prescribed social stations. One of the most interesting ideas to emerge from this study is the extent to which workhouse representations function subliminally to delineate and reinforce a middle-class identity. Many of the texts

discussed were produced by and for the middle classes: the values and ideologies latent in these workhouse representations provide an insight not just into how the middle classes assimilated ideas about institutions and the poor, but also into what it meant to be middle class. The scenes of charity, grand exteriors and domestic interiors, all reflect the workhouse as imagined through a bourgeois lens and feed into the construction of a comforting sense of self. As a collective, workhouse representations form a melting pot of nineteenth-century fears and fantasies, engaging as they do with ideas of disease, morality, state officialdom, gender, social class and nationality.

Though not clear cut, an overall shift in workhouse representation can be traced across the years of the study. Workhouse representations of the 1830s and 40s tend to sensationalise the institution and emphasise its horrors. By the end of the century, however, the agenda of workhouse representations is more frequently to demonstrate that the workhouse is a protective, even caring, environment for the needy poor, whether they deserve it or not. This shift in representation speaks to a society in which the perceptions of the causes of poverty were slowly changing. Whereas poverty was once the invariable result of individual failings, there was a growing recognition across the century that poverty could be due to a more complex set of social circumstances. Though many texts from the late nineteenth-century still suggest that paupers are to blame for their own misfortunes, they also seem to direct their energies towards emphasising the care given to the paupers in the institution, whether or not they are at fault. Read together, the various manifestations tell a narrative not only of the cultural history of the workhouse, but about a society grappling with ideas of identity, class and authority.

Workhouses also have a peculiarly contemporary relevance. The buildings themselves, now appropriated for hospitals and other uses, continue to stand in towns and cities as familiar parts of the landscape. One such former workhouse is open to the public as a

museum: the workhouse at Southwell, owned by the National Trust, offers visitors a chance to explore inside the building and experience a taste of pauper life for themselves.¹ A visitor to this museum steps into the shoes of the nineteenth-century philanthropist or curiosity seeker, moving through, and peering into, the nooks and crannies of a workhouse. Another former institution, the Cleveland Street workhouse in London, has come to prominence due to a campaign to save it from demolition; the campaign attracted public attention when historian Ruth Richardson evidenced the proximity of the workhouse to the childhood home of Charles Dickens and drew attention to it as the possible inspiration for the workhouse of *Oliver Twist*.

In popular culture, the television and film adaptations of *Oliver Twist* that have proliferated since the twentieth century have ensured that this workhouse orphan's plight remains widely known today.² Even those who have not read the original text itself frequently associate *Oliver Twist* with the workhouse.³ The workhouse has also been brought into the public eye by several popular period dramas that feature or mention the institution (Channel 4's *The Mill*, BBC's *Call the Midwife*, ITV's *Downton Abbey*) and has provided the inspiration for the ITV documentary *Secrets from the Workhouse*.

At a moment when public provision for the poor is being debated and reassessed, nineteenth-century discussions about the workhouse are more significant than ever. Since the formation of the coalition government in 2010, numerous speeches and articles on the subject

¹ As they move around the building, visitors listen to an audio guide which creates a type of living history experience.

² Juliet John has written on the numerous adaptations of *Oliver Twist* for the screen. She draws attention to the absence of references to the New Poor Law in these adaptations and notes that '[t]o Dickens and a large number of his readers, of course, the novel's strident position on the Poor Laws would have been its most striking political contribution; it says a great deal about the way in which history adapts and metamorphoses the politics of texts that audiences' consciousness of the Poor Laws has dissipated in the novel's screen afterlife'. See Juliet John, *Dickens and Mass Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 230. It seems then, that in popular culture at least, the representation of the workhouse has become a cultural icon that conveys meaning independently of its political framework.

³ John points out that '[i]f the hypothetical person in the street has an image of Oliver asking for more or of Fagin, that person, in the twenty-first century at least, need not have read the novel. It is arguable that adaptations of *Oliver Twist* have indeed had more impact on the public than Dickens's original novel'. *Ibid.*, pp. 207-239 (p. 208).

of the poor and spending cuts have made reference to the workhouse system. Speaking on the subject of the Tory ‘back to work scheme’, for example, a Unite union official denounced the proposal by asserting that ‘[t]he scheme belongs back in the nineteenth century, along with *Oliver Twist* and the workhouse. It is nothing short of state sponsored slavery’.⁴ Newspaper articles reporting on the jobless have also invoked the workhouse and its associated vocabulary: headlines have included ‘Tory Spending Cuts Send us Back to the Misery of the Victorian Workhouse’ (*Mirror*, 2010), ‘Sterilise the poor and bring back the workhouse: Public's bizarre suggestions for spending cuts’ (*Daily Mail*, 2012), ‘Back to the Workhouse’, (*Guardian*, 2012), ‘Conservative conference verdict: George Osborne is Mr Bumble AND Billy Liar’ (*Mirror*, 2013), ‘Tories: Back to the workhouse’ (*Daily Mirror*, 2013).⁵ The workhouse is used in these articles as a rhetorical device that warns readers about the threatening future of today’s welfare state. It seems, then, that representations of the workhouse remain an intrinsic part of culture; these twenty-first century representations may tell us just as much about society today as nineteenth-century representations can reveal about their own time. With debates about the poor continuing to rage, the spectre of the workhouse has never been so close.

⁴ ‘Workfare’s “state sponsored slavery” condemned as Unite announces boycott’, *Unite the Union*, 28 June 2012. Available online at: http://archive.uniteunion.org/news__events/latest_news/workfare_s__state_sponsored_sl.aspx [date accessed 23 January 2014]. A speech made by David Cameron hotly contested this accusation: ‘Honestly. What an appalling, snobbish attitude to the idea of work. We’re not sending children up chimneys, we’re giving them a chance’. David Cameron, Conference 2012, 10 October 2012. Available online at: http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2012/10/David_Cameron_Conference [date accessed 18/12/2013].

⁵ ‘Tory Spending Cuts Send us Back to the Misery of the Victorian Workhouse’, *Mirror*, 21 October 2010. Available online at: <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/tory-spending-cuts-send-us-back-255442> [date accessed 23 January 2014]. John Harris, ‘Back to the Workhouse’, *Guardian*, 8 June 2012. Available online at: <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2012/jun/08/jubilee-stewards-unpaid-labour-growing> [date accessed 23 January 2014]. ‘Sterilise the poor and bring back the workhouse: Public's bizarre suggestions for spending cuts’, *Daily Mail*, 14 July 2012. Available online at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1294397/Sterilise-poor-bring-workhouse-Publics-bizarre-suggestions-spending-cuts.html> [Date accessed 23 January 2014]. Kevin Maguire, ‘Conservative conference verdict: George Osborne is Mr Bumble AND Billy Liar’, *Mirror*, 1 October 2013. Available online at: <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/uk-news/kevin-maguire-conservative-conference-george-2325512> [date accessed 23 January 2014]. ‘Cam’s War on Jobless: Tories: Back to the Workhouse’, *Daily Mirror*, 20 September 2013, p. [1].

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