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Manon Labrande

- 1 Penny Dreadful texts are quintessentially linked with traditions of retelling: from the 1830s on, the main tropes of these serial publications revolved around parodying, repeating, re-using and adapting one another as well as famous tales of the time. The pleasure of this “comfort of ritual combined with the piquancy of surprise” (Hutcheon 4) is no doubt one of the key reasons behind the genre’s tremendous popularity. But these hundreds of tales seem to be for the most part confined to the Victorian era (i.e. the period between the 1830s and the turn of the century): while their thematic and narrative persistence combined with material variation secured the Penny Dreadfuls’ central place in the development of literacy and in the democratisation of reading in nineteenth-century Britain, for over a century, and for a variety of ideological as well as cultural reasons, they did not remain part of the changing landscapes of entertainment but for a few exceptions. The tale of Sweeney Todd is one of these exceptions.
- 2 The original story of Sweeney Todd was published in weekly instalments from November 1846 to March 1847, sold for a penny each, under the title of *The String of Pearls: A Romance* (hereafter referred to simply as *The String of Pearls*). Characterised by recent criticism as an “urban spectacle of pointless murder and communal cannibalism” (Davies and Emeljanow 89), the violent tale of the murderous barber was true to the tradition of the Penny Bloods¹ of the time. It was instantly adapted for the stage by George Dibdin Pitt in 1847, and the second half of the nineteenth century subsequently witnessed the appearance of a variety of rewritings both in print and on stage. But contrary to most Penny Blood stories, this one did not disappear at the turn of the century. Its potential did not wane and Sweeney Todd as a character lived on,²

until the 1979 Broadway musical adaptation by Stephen Sondheim made it a Neo-Victorian fixture of contemporary popular culture, as *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* was acclaimed as a musical theatre masterpiece.³ In 2007, the musical was adapted by Tim Burton into film under the very same title: achieving success both on the musical stage (on Broadway and the West End) and in Hollywood meant that Sweeney Todd finally ticked the required boxes to become an integral part of the contemporary entertainment industry and society of the Western world, even beyond an Anglophone context.

- 3 The aim of this essay is to bring together the original Sweeney Todd narrative and its latest versions in order to shed light on the links that shape this “constellation” and on what this “image”⁴ tells us of the complex relationship between these three versions of the story. I claim that the case of Sweeney Todd is one of “rebooting” or “reconfiguration” as defined by Ruth Mayer (Mayer 14), rather than adaptation: the nineteenth-century text is revived through new media, and the ‘adaptation’ becomes a translation and iteration force working to scrutinise the workings of twentieth-century ideology and “sensibility”. Transmediality (from literature to theatre to cinema) is at the heart of the unique trajectory of this penny blood, as the change in medium plays a part in the translation into contemporary ethos thanks to the new possibilities offered or restrictions imposed, and the original topics circulate through the different versions. The new treatment of the cultural anxieties of an era or of the central thread of anthropophagy also pose the question of the function of such a revival; perhaps as a reaction to the cyclicity of history rather than a mere backward-looking glance. Finally, the evolution of characterisation brings to light deeper social implications, in its problematic take on female agency as well as in the romanticisation of the protagonist, from a murderous villain (in the Penny Dreadful) into a tragic hero (in Sondheim’s and Burton’s versions). From page to stage to screen, the character’s transmedial circulation allows us to discuss and compare aesthetics, discourses and themes that run through the three versions: while Linda Hutcheon talks of a postmodern age of cultural recycling (Hutcheon 3), here, there is very little expectation in terms of literary source, since the original text has *not* found its way into the canon. This means that, as opposed to a text such as Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*, there is no romantic valuing of the original creation, and the modern “reconfigurations” thus have no expectation to fulfil or thwart. For this precise reason, I argue that the reinterpretation of the Sweeney Todd narrative in contemporary culture brings to light the dialogue we hold with our Victorian past rather than mere nostalgia, and helps understand ‘modern’ workings of ideology.

From sensationalism to humour and tragedy

- 4 The revival of this nineteenth-century text in the second part of the twentieth century brought about a wide range of adjustments and changes, first and foremost in terms of form. The fact that these two versions are the only musical ones is crucial: if the tone clearly shifts between the original version and its twentieth-century interpretations, it is partly because the narration radically changes, from sensationalism to humour and tragedy, thanks to “new”, or rather, different narrative devices introduced by the musical genre, as well as the circulation of musical motifs through the story.

- 5 *The String of Pearls* is the perfect example of a penny blood in terms of genre and themes. The story of the murderous barber and his greedy pie-maker accomplice is a violent one, and for the most part receives a Manichean treatment, particularly in its characterisation, as I will analyse in a later section. The dark atmosphere of urban gothic London frames every gruesome action perpetrated by Sweeney Todd, and the tone is achieved by two of its main constituents: sensationalism⁵ and seriality. In this penny blood, sensationalist storytelling is accomplished with the help of a very present heterodiegetic unreliable narrating voice, which participates in the unravelling of different plots by directly commenting on the events and adding suspense. Indeed, phrasings such as “but we must not anticipate” (*String of Pearls*, 199) or “we may pass over [this conversation]” (*String of Pearls*, 86) are extremely frequent, and give the feeling of an orchestrated rather than simply narrated story. The sensationalism brought about by this unreliable narrator is enhanced by the serial nature of these publications, as the break between published parts provides the opportunity for real suspense, actually requiring the readers to wait for another week before finding out what comes next. Whether what *does* come next justifies the thrill is then irrelevant: sensationalism reaches its goal by triggering the expectation of a shock in the first place.
- 6 Stephen Sondheim’s musical adaptation, in comparison, presents a much more ambivalent atmosphere. For the first time, the story of Sweeney Todd is set to music, and over 80% of the musical production actually is either sung or orchestrated music underneath dialogue (Brown n.p.) in order to, according to Sondheim, “keep the audience in a state of tension” (Sondheim 274). As McGill mentions, the macabre feel is partly assumed by the ominous presence of the organ in the orchestration of the original Broadway production, bearing an almost demonic and ghostly presence (McGill 11).⁶ The narrator-voice’s constant presence in the original text changes drastically, as the different characters now share the narration through different individual songs: Todd presents his situation in his first song “No Place Like London”, followed by pie-maker Mrs Lovett’s account of what happened to his family in “Poor Thing”. Yet one of the devices of the musical genre bridges this transition from the original text: the opening number sung by the ensemble, “The Ballad of Sweeney Todd”,⁷ sets the stage while resorting to similar sensationalism tropes as the text, in such lyrics as “What happened then—well, that’s the play, / And he wouldn’t want us to give it away” (Sondheim and Wheeler 3). Interestingly, this song comes back as a reprise⁸ no less than seven times over the course of the whole production. The ensemble takes on a chorus function, which Rodgers and Hammerstein⁹ themselves explained as “interpret[ing] the mental and emotional reactions of the principal characters, after the manner of a Greek chorus” (Rodgers and Hammerstein 185). The reference to Greek tragedy here is key: the Sondheim version indeed incorporates a new tragic aspect, developed not only in characterisation but also in its musical specificities. Opening the musical, the ensemble/chorus sets the scene, regularly comes back throughout the story, and in the production’s last number offers yet another variation of “The Ballad of Sweeney Todd”. The circulation of this same musical motif throughout the story brings the audience back to its tragic aspect time and time again; while other musical elements come to punctuate Sondheim’s relentless underscoring, such as a frequent use of the minor key (otherwise rarely used in musicals [Brown n.p.]) or of a blood-curdling factory whistle sound, participating in the new mix of sensationalism and tragedy typical of Sondheim’s take on this narrative. According to

Howard Kissel, the latter is necessary for contemporary audiences: "when it is used to punctuate moments of horror, the whistle, blaring and abrasive, implies an awareness that it takes quite a lot, nowadays, to shock us" (Kissel n.p.). In other words, since Victorian sensationalism could not be trusted to trigger that desired reaction of shock on its own, the musical adaptation finds ways to update the mechanisms to suit modern audiences—a technique that is also at the heart of Sondheim's inspiration of film composer Bernard Herrmann, known for having scored Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) or *Psycho* (1960) (see McGill). The tone is set as early as the prelude, with the combination of its orchestration (with the organ) and its harmony (the "Herrmann chord").

- 7 The Sondheim production does not only introduce tragedy to the story, but also humour, as it regularly counterbalances the overhanging tension with actual laugh-out-loud moments, clever puns, and diegetic fun. One key example is the last song before the intermission, "A Little Priest", in which Lovett suggests using Todd's victims as meat for her pies and sings for seven minutes in cannibalistic puns.¹⁰ At the end of a first act during which the audience witnesses the graphic violence of Todd's first crime (his victim's freshly slashed throat squirting blood all over the stage), as well as the terrifying "Epiphany" song declaring his thirst for revenge, "A Little Priest" comes as comic relief and allows the audience to transition back into a lighter mood before the intermission. What is more, the song begins with the following lines by Mrs Lovett: "Seems an awful waste... / I mean, with the price of meat / What it is, / When you get it, / If you get it..." – Todd thinks for a while, laughs out loud as he understands the implication, and she answers "Good you got it!" (Sondheim and Wheeler, *Sweeney Todd*, 82). Seeing the murderous protagonist burst into laughter for the very first time marks a turning point in the humorous tone of the play, as the tragic component, i.e. Todd's story, acquires more nuance.
- 8 In 2007, this production was adapted into a musical film by Tim Burton, who chose to preserve its format and work with Sondheim on the adaptation of the play's musical qualities (Salisbury 19). Burton's wish to create a "combination of horror movie and musical" (Salisbury 6) inspired by the Hammer Horror films tradition¹¹ led to yet another shift in tone. As Sharon Aronofsky Weltman points out, musical horror movies "tend to campiness, affectionately ridiculing both the musical and the horror genres"—for example *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* in 1975 or *Little Shop of Horrors* in 1986 (Weltman 302). Burton's first experiment in the horror musical genre with the stop-motion animated film *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (1993) already somewhat departs from that tradition, preferring melancholy to comedy and taking seriously both its gruesome aspects and its music in creating a sort of dark fairy tale. Burton took this endeavour a step further with *Sweeney Todd*, eliminating any light undertones present in *The Nightmare Before Christmas* (which had an ambivalent status as a children's story belonging to weird fiction), and allowing the music to feed into a new dimension of tragedy. These tragic and dramatic aspects are enhanced by the visual choice of muted colours, between sepia and black and white (Sweeney Todd's dark clothes and pale face no doubt reminding the audience of Edward Scissorhands, Burton's other melancholy master of sharp blades), while the only vivid colour is that of blood squirting, staining Todd's immaculate sleeves. Only two scenes in the entire film feature lighter colours—one is a flashback to Todd's happier past, the other one is Mrs Lovett's fantasy future, and once again Burton's visual choices participate in the narration by signalling different levels of reality.¹² Finally, the humour introduced in the stage production almost disappears, as the barber becomes a brooding heartbroken (mad)man. Now, in

"A Little Priest", his answer to Lovett's "if you get it" is not laughter anymore, but an interested "ah..." (Burton, *Sweeney Todd*, 64:08-64:12) prompting her to develop. The joy with which Todd reacts to the suggestion of cannibalism and financial success in Sondheim's musical is now toned down in favour of his desire to take revenge, exemplified by lyrics such as "How gratifying for once to know / That those above will serve those down below!" (Sondheim and Wheeler, *Sweeney Todd*, 86) triggering his enthusiasm.

- 9 Furthermore, the narrative's transmedial translation seems to lead to the disappearance of the narrative voice in the film version. Indeed, the choral narration that was disseminated through the stage production is now absent: the script originally included a version of the "Ballad of Sweeney Todd" as an opening scene, which was cut later. Although not a narrative tool anymore, sensationalism is nevertheless retained in the film's Hammer-like atmosphere and palette of colours, as blood is spilt very graphically in the tradition of *Grand Guignol* theatre¹³ and Todd sports a visually striking white streak of hair in otherwise dark curls, like an homage to the 1935 *Bride of Frankenstein*.¹⁴ Screenwriter John Logan explains the narration as executed in turns by the different characters in an attempt to "[tell] where the characters are emotionally, psychologically, spiritually, at that moment" (Salisbury 17). This dimension, though perhaps in part attenuating the story's impact, is symptomatic of the need of the contemporary ethos for understanding and making sense of a terrible situation, and was absent from the Victorian text, which focused on depicting the situation rather than its protagonists' psychological depth. But though modern audiences develop an interest for the characters' inner complexity, the recent versions of this Victorian narrative nevertheless do not relinquish the original themes, and interestingly appropriate topics like industrialisation, urbanisation, and cannibalisation to different degrees compared to the original text.

Transposing the cultural anxieties of an era

- 10 Although the original themes of *The String of Pearls* are topical for its era of publication, putting them into perspective with their treatment (or sometimes *non-treatment*) in contemporary versions brings to light a dialogue with our Victorian past. As these themes are developed, transformed, furthered, or deleted, their renegotiation questions just how Victorian and/or Neo-Victorian they really are. Are they taken up again to signify a longing for the past, a desire of going back? Or could they be a reaction to history's cyclicity? What might have appeared to be symptomatic of the cultural anxieties of a precise era becomes crucial to the appeal of the contemporary versions, betraying long-standing resonance and our "continued indebtedness to the nineteenth century, for good or for ill" (Llewellyn 165), while allowing for critical work on the Victorians *and* ourselves.
- 11 The one theme that, somewhat strikingly, completely vanishes from the contemporary versions of the Sweeney Todd narrative is that of the Empire. *The String of Pearls* essentially tells the story of a piece of jewellery sent from India to London by Mark Ingestrie, as a token of his love for Johanna Oakley. Mark undertakes the voyage "in search of a treasure" (*String of Pearls*, 47), hoping to make a fortune and return to England. But right at the beginning of the story, Johanna is told by an army colonel that Mark's ship "sunked [*sic*] beneath the waves, never to rise again" (*String of Pearls*, 47).

One of the plotlines from then on concerns the mysterious disappearance of both the string of pearls and the messenger who had been entrusted with delivering it to Johanna. As the necklace makes its way through the city, each of its successive proprietors seems to suffer fateful consequences: Mark is shipwrecked, the messenger is murdered by Sweeney Todd, and Todd is robbed. As a signifier, the piece of jewellery therefore takes on different meanings: wreaking havoc in the city instead of bringing the long-hoped-for stability, it stands for the wealth coming from England's richest colony, then transforms into an expression of the fear of reverse colonisation, of the Empire's potential collapse. Soon after the penny dreadful publication, the string of pearls loses its place in the story's title: from Dibdin Pitt's 1847 stage version onwards, no adaptation carries this title apart from one single exception.¹⁵ One of the key elements that used to function as a metonymy for the Empire and its wealth and as a motif for reverse colonisation thus lost its impact early on, in favour of the gruesome and sensational protagonist.¹⁶

- 12 Contemporary productions not only dispense with the string of pearls, but also with the character of Mark Ingestrie. In fact, *every* character involved in his storyline has either been modified or deleted altogether. Johanna keeps her name and is still at the heart of a romantic plot, but her suitor is now called Anthony Hope. And if the latter arrives to London on a ship, his first song "No Place Like London" only states that he has sailed "from the Dardanelles / To the mountains of Peru" (Sondheim and Wheeler, *Sweeney Todd*, 7). There is no mention of India specifically, or of the East in general. Any reference to the empire has thus been deleted from contemporary versions, indicating that modern audiences' interests perhaps lie elsewhere, in more relatable or less political topics such as the other threads that constituted the original story.
- 13 Whether it is the version of 1846, of 1979 or of 2007, one feature always remains: the story is set in London exclusively, in the area of St Dunstan's Church, more precisely on Fleet Street, where the barbershop is located. This spot is particularly interesting as it coincides with the original site of Temple Bar,¹⁷ which until 1878 marked the boundary between the cities of London and Westminster, and was one of the busiest entrances to the City of London.¹⁸ The fact that Todd murders his victims almost exactly at the place that represents the city's border therefore turns those murders into quasi-sacrificial acts, into a rite of passage which, as Victor Turner argues, could potentially enable experimentation with alternative social relations (Turner 96). Indeed, it is no coincidence that the Penny Dreadful comes into being at the precise historical period when the City of London is perceived as ever-expanding, beyond control, and a place where (moral) chaos begins to replace order. More than doubling its physical size between 1688 and 1800, London was already described in the eighteenth century as "constantly suck[ing] in people from the countryside" (Harris 5), and both fiction and art quickly became rife with stories such as William Hogarth's *Harlot Progress*:¹⁹ young and/or hopeful people leaving the countryside for the opportunities of the city, never to be heard of again. *The String of Pearls* develops this topical cultural anxiety of fast-developing urbanisation and its unprecedented sense of anonymity, in which the threat of being "swallowed up" by London as the ever-growing monster is made real by Sweeney Todd's association with Mrs Lovett. In this "cautionary folktale" (Mack 66), people, rather than merely losing touch with their loved ones, lose their bodies as well as their identities, and are literally 'eaten up' the very moment the victims enter the boundaries of London.

- 14 *The String of Pearls* thus demonstrates a certain awareness of the transformation of society occurring at a dramatic pace. Raymond Williams develops the idea that this is generally the case for literature of the 1840s:

We can see [the decade] as the decisive period in which the consciousness of a new phase of civilisation was being formed and expressed. The radical transformation of life in Britain, by the extended development of the first Industrial Revolution, by the transformation from a predominantly rural to a predominantly urban society, and by the consequent political struggle [...] for and against the emergence of an organised working class, was then in its most disturbed and creative phase [...]. What comes through most decisively in the [1840s] novels is the consciousness of this transforming, liberating, and threatening time. (Williams 11)

- 15 If urbanisation anxiety is already at the heart of the original narrative, the contemporary versions not only adopt the motif but strengthen and enrich it, linking it more outspokenly with the fear of industrialisation that Williams mentions. Both the stage and screen productions preserve exclusively urban settings and open with clear markers indicating to audiences that the scene takes place in London. Signs and placards in the musical's *décor* indicate this clearly; and the film's establishing shot, like an echo to the opening scene of Burton's *Sleepy Hollow*,²⁰ shows blood dripping onto the street and circulating faster and faster through the city, its progression synced with the opening instrumental piece, until the first sung number "No Place Like London" confirms the location. In addition to this, Harold Prince's staging of the Sondheim production indicates a clear intention: "The theatrical backdrop against which this *Sweeney Todd* was to be performed took on the appearance [...] of a gigantic and inhuman machine; it became a visual metaphor [...] for the Industrial Revolution itself as something that dwarfed, degraded and dehumanised whatever it touched" (Secrest 296). From the original production up to very recent ones, the stage is traditionally built as an emphatically industrial setting with factory-style *décor*, so much so that a recent Viennese production²¹ presented a stage where the floor of each room was made of enormous revolving cogs. Similarly, in the opening credits of the Burton film, the aforementioned dripping blood passes through working cogs several times before continuing its course through the pavement stones, thus literally assimilating violence to mechanisation (and thereby, to the Industrial Revolution) from the very beginning. This imagery of cogs and machinery is at its strongest in *Sweeney Todd*'s revolving chair: in all three versions of the narrative, he builds a complex mechanism to put his plan into action. *The String of Pearls* features a shaving-chair screwed onto a revolving piece of floor, underneath which a second identical chair is fixed, so that by activating the mechanism the first chair (and its occupant) can be replaced by the second (empty) chair instantly. The Sondheim and the Burton versions only feature one chair and a trap door, and the mechanisms consist in the respective chairs prompting their occupants to fall either head or feet first towards the trap door. In any case, the victim falls to the lower floor. The complex mechanisation of this chair is already in place at the beginning of the *Penny Blood*, and in both musical versions Todd builds it as soon as the plan hatches. Its presence can thus be read as a metaphor for the threat industrialisation and its administrators pose to the people, but is perhaps also an ironic representation of the efficiency of mass production, as it is what allows Todd's plan to proceed to its most gruesome step, sending the victims' bodies down to Lovett's kitchen. The interior space of the barber shop can therefore be seen, as Robert L. Mack remarks, as "offering an ironic commentary on the increasing mechanisation of the period" (Mack 66) as we witness a micro-version of the principle

of division of labour: from the meat supplier (Sweeney Todd), to the cook (Mrs Lovett) and vendor (Mrs Lovett and/or various employees).

"Such a nice plump frame" ("A Little Priest", Sondheim and Wheeler, *Sweeney Todd*, 82): cannibalism and commodification

- 16 In allowing the victims to be processed into meat pies to be eaten by their own compatriots, the theme of anthropophagy has given voice to both this metaphor of relentless industrialisation and the overhanging anxiety in this new period of growth and development since the beginnings of the Sweeney Todd narratives. The various urban legends said to have inspired the Penny Dreadful all had two features in common: the murderer was a barber (whether in Paris or London²²), and the victims ended up cannibalised. *The String of Pearls* opens in Todd's parlour with his apprentice Toby, and the first conversation foreshadows the whole plot before the reader even learns about the murders:

"I'll cut your throat from ear to ear, if you repeat one word of what passes in this shop, or dare to make any supposition, or draw any conclusion from anything you may see, or hear, or fancy you see or hear. Now you understand me—I'll cut your throat from ear to ear—do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir, I won't say nothing. I wish, sir, as I maybe [sic] made into veal pies at Lovett's in Bell Yard if I as much as says [sic] a word.' Sweeney Todd rose from his seat; and opening his huge mouth, he looked at the boy for a minute or two in silence, as if he fully intended swallowing him, but had not quite made up his mind where to begin." (*String of Pearls*, 3)

- 17 From the start, cannibalism is thus woven into the story as a sensationalist thread which then runs through the whole plot: the narrator repeatedly hints at it, but always interrupts the quasi-revelation to redirect the narrative elsewhere, and the facts are only mentioned directly twice in the Penny Blood. Opening with Toby's oath of silence and metaphor—or so he thinks—about being "made into veal pies" if he breaks it, the story is actually framed by metaphorical or direct references to anthropophagy. The story indeed closes with a sensational unveiling of the truth, and italics are used to emphasise how literal the threat of cannibalism turns out to be: the narrator reports in the penultimate chapter that Todd would "go down to finish the murder, and—to cut them up for Mrs Lovett's pies!" (*String of Pearls*, 277), and Mark finally reveals to the public in the last chapter, fittingly entitled "The Conclusion": "Ladies and Gentlemen—I fear that what I am going to say will spoil your appetites; but the truth is beautiful at all times, and I have to state that Mrs Lovett's pies are made of *human flesh!*" (*String of Pearls*, 280). The emphasis has been consistently reproduced in all of the tale's reprints. As the italics leap off the page, they demonstrate the quotes' significance, stressing the horror of the revelation and the macabre nature of what runs Sweeney Todd and Mrs Lovett's business, and therefore, the whole plot.
- 18 In both stage and film adaptations, cannibalism becomes a lot more prominent, perhaps because written sensationalism typical of the Victorian publication fades in favour of the visuality required for a Broadway musical. The narrative structure is different from the penny blood, which opened at a random point in time when Sweeney Todd's business was already going strong, bringing readers to this tale indirectly

because of Johanna's missing lover. In the musical production, anthropophagy is only introduced at the end of the first act, but then assumes dramatic proportions. Rather than being hinted at, the pie-making process (and what it entails) is made clear as soon as the idea occurs to Mrs Lovett—in fact, the 7-minute long song "A Little Priest" is such a gripping element in the musical that the critic T.E. Kalem, in a *New York Theatre Review* in 1979, described Sondheim's production as "one giant step for vegetarianism" (qtd in Zadan 258). Lovett's first song, "The Worst Pies in London", already interferes with and indeed desecrates the quintessentially English meat pie that Mack calls one of the most "symbolic products of the island's culinary heritage" (Mack 11), as it voices the possibility of "popping pussies into pies" (Sondheim and Wheeler, *Sweeney Todd*, 14) to get by financially. "A Little Priest" takes the idea further, as Todd and Lovett reflect on what to do with the first victim's body: "And a pussy's good for maybe six or seven at the most. / And I'm sure they can't compare as far as taste" (Sondheim and Wheeler, *Sweeney Todd*, 82). Starting with the idea of not wasting meat while giving the shop a financial boost, the waltz-duet develops into a string of puns. As a result, what was intensely disturbing in the *Penny Blood* becomes unequivocally tinted with dark humour, and phrases such as "everybody goes down well with beer" (Sondheim and Wheeler, *Sweeney Todd*, 88) hint at a decidedly different ethos in dealing with such a taboo. As Mack convincingly argues, contemporary audiences enjoy this "illicit engagement with material that we know ought more properly to be treated with greater seriousness, or perhaps not treated at all" (Mack 58): the dark humour running through the plot development is actually intertwined with the production's melodramatic appeal.

- 19 The central position cannibalism occupies is equally noticeable in the very list of the stage production's musical numbers. "A Little Priest" happens at the end of the first act, and therefore in the middle of the show as the last song before the intermission; but the second act begins with "God That's Good", a song that displays Mrs Lovett's success as she sells whole batches of pies to delighted customers raving about how delicious they are and asking for her secret. Even as she answers a modest "all to do with herbs" (Sondheim and Wheeler, *Sweeney Todd*, 99), the audience knows exactly what they are witnessing, since the intermission is framed by those two cannibalistic numbers. As the theme expands, cannibalism becomes a metaphorical practice as well, circulating through the second act and contaminating seemingly non-threatening numbers such as "By The Sea". Lovett dreams of her future with Todd once financial security is achieved, and sings: "I'm so happy / I could / eat you up, I really could!" (Sondheim and Wheeler, *Sweeney Todd*, 115), each pause marked by the sound of her kissing Todd. Her mouth physically getting closer to him as she playfully expresses the wish to "eat him up" introduces cannibalism as an erotic metaphor, a means of bringing the person as close as possible both physically and emotionally: the motif invades speech as well as actions, the personal as well as the professional, the romantic as well as the economic aspects of the protagonists' lives.
- 20 While both the Sondheim and the Burton versions are set in Victorian times, it is interesting to note that the original *Penny Blood* is not. The opening chapter clearly states the year 1785, which means that this tale of murder was only transposed to the nineteenth century for modern audiences. While *The String of Pearls* took the form of a cautionary tale in the oral storytelling tradition²³ dealing with supposedly recent events, the contemporary story takes place in the era it was written in, which happens to be the one we seem to think best suited to its unravelling. Dark alleyways in an

urban gothic city, shocking cold-blooded murders, and a serial killer lurking—Sweeney Todd's narrative echoes the notorious Victorian murderer Jack the Ripper,²⁴ and its cannibalistic undertones remind us of the "From Hell" letter sent to the Whitechapel Vigilance Committee.²⁵ This narrative can therefore be interpreted as participating in the systemic cultural memory of myths, but also of folk stories, as its underlying cannibalistic obsession mirrors those of traditional folk narratives or fairy tales: *Hansel and Gretel*, *Bluebeard* and a great many other Perrault stories;²⁶ but also such tales as *Little Red Riding Hood*, or Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, which resort to the motifs of eating, food, and ingestion in an attempt to make sense of atavistic human desires. In addition to speaking to contemporary preoccupations with consumption and consumerism, the cannibalism motif also is linked to issues of human mortality, of "selfhood and otherness, isolation and community" (Mack 11)—in short, of human nature and societal relationships. As a motif, cannibalism expresses such cultural anxieties as developed above by exacting a form of absorption leading to a loss of identity through ingestion and digestion.

- 21 Another metaphorical dimension of anthropophagy, constantly voiced in the musical by asking "who gets eaten and who gets to eat" (Sondheim and Wheeler, *Sweeney Todd*, 88) and tied in with the issues of community and otherness, is class warfare. Vocalising the facts described in the penny blood and putting into words its underlying provocative thinking, Sweeney sings "How gratifying for once to know / That those above will serve those down below!" (Sondheim and Wheeler, *Sweeney Todd*, 86) as a reversal of the ruling social hierarchy. The working-class can absorb and digest the higher-born, in a Marxist reading of cannibalisation and of the revolving chair as literally bringing down the ones that are metaphorically up the social ladder. The victims (whose higher social rank is confirmed in the list of professions chosen in "A Little Priest") are violently and literally brought down to the lower floor, where they either break their necks or get their throats cut. In the contemporary versions, the shaving parlour is conveniently situated on the floor above the pie shop, making this metaphorical reversal of society's order even more efficient. As the victims' bodies fall directly into the kitchen to be turned into pies, the revolving chair acts as the literal instrument of a social revolution, and perhaps visualises re-appropriating the Industrial Revolution's mechanisation for the working-class's purposes rather than for the benefit of the upper-class. The chair and its trap door thus become an engulfing device that swallows people up, echoing anxieties about urbanisation, but instead of threatening the poor people who move to the city in hopes of a better life, this mechanical monster seems to exact working-class revenge in the deliberate selection of highborn victims. Cannibalism is staged as an "eminently practical" financial solution ("A Little Priest", Sondheim and Wheeler, *Sweeney Todd*, 83), a way of making the accomplices rich and the pie shop prosperous. The song "A Little Priest" assesses the "pie potential" of this or that profession: politician would be "too oily", priest "too good", clergy "too mealy", actor "compacter", fiddle player "stringy", etc. People are reduced to their value, be it nutritional or financial, and are only worth what they produce. Through the comical selection of victims on the basis of their physicality, people are commodified as they themselves become interchangeable objects, i.e. meat pies, mass-produced in exchange for money. This echoes body-snatching practices, but with an even more gruesome twist, resulting not only in a loss of identity but in digestion by someone else's body. The Sweeney Todd narrative thus offers a satire of the exploitative structures of capitalism itself and of the supposed 'progress' of a

mercantile society (Mack 63) which advocates the accumulation of capital, at the expense of the people (the ones that are not murdered end up being tricked into eating human flesh), and in a world where even churches literally stink,²⁷ like a symbol for society's degeneracy.

The evolution of characterisation

- 22 In addition to continuing and expanding the critique of society's structure, contemporary versions of the Sweeney Todd narrative also bring to light deeper social implications through an evolution in the treatment of their characters. If most of the protagonists have kept their names and physical characteristics, their characterisation itself has changed tremendously. Johanna, for example, is at the heart of the romantic subplot in *The String of Pearls* and still a central part of the adaptations, but for different reasons: from a character only related to Todd through the disappearance of the string of pearls, she turns into one of his blood relatives. As his long-lost daughter, her backstory intertwines with that of Judge Turpin (who does not exist in the penny blood): some fifteen years before the events that the audience witnesses and as she was just a toddler, the Judge wrongfully convicted Sweeney Todd, transported him to Australia, and raped Johanna's mother Lucy, thereby driving her insane. Since then, Johanna has been Turpin's ward, and is kept under lock and key until he can eventually marry her. This character is the symbol of Todd's lost hope, as he sings in his "Epiphany": "And I'll never see Johanna, / No, I'll never hug my girl to me— / Finished!" (Sondheim and Wheeler, *Sweeney Todd*, 80). This melancholy directly leads to the development of Todd's thirst for revenge, which is what epitomises the shift in focus and makes the ethos decidedly more contemporary. While this is common to both the musical and the film version, the 'incestuous' relationship between the Judge and his ward is treated differently. Though present in both, it is considerably more developed on stage, where he sings his "Mea Culpa": "The light behind your window— / It penetrates your gown... / Johanna, Johanna, / [...] No! / God! / Deliver me!" (Sondheim and Wheeler, *Sweeney Todd*, 46) as he flagellates himself as a punishment for feeling sexually attracted to the girl he raised. Turpin's guilt and his religious attempts to redeem himself are absent from the film, as this song is cut, and the 'incestuous' relationship is more understated: the idea of marrying Johanna and trying to seduce her is still present but any outspoken sexual attraction towards her disappears. This potentially hints at Hollywood's taboos: while the film is certainly not aiming at the broadest possible audience, given that it was actually rated R for "graphic bloody violence", the moral implications of the Judge's incestuous desires seem to have been hard to reconcile for the mainstream film industry.
- 23 What is more, the evolution of Johanna as a character shows a rather paradoxical take on female agency. Sondheim's musical first depicts a disconsolate girl, who is held prisoner by the Judge and whose only contact with the outside world is with a woman regularly passing her window and selling caged birds. From the moment she meets Anthony, she becomes a lot more active as they plan to elope together ("Kiss Me"). When the Judge sends her to an asylum to prevent her from leaving, she ends up shooting the warden herself during her rescue mission as Anthony does not dare to. Burton's film, by contrast, strips her from this agency as she watches the other inmates attack the warden; and brings Johanna back as an incarnation of the "angel in the

house", to an extent that even the Victorian text did not force on her. After all, *The String of Pearls* has her act as one of the investigators on the case of Mark's disappearance; for this purpose, she even meets alone in the city with an ex-Army captain. By comparison, the film, although much more recent, only ever shows a passive Johanna, who follows instructions but never displays any form of initiative—the damsel in distress ends up rescued by Anthony and does not contribute to organising their elopement.

- 24 Mrs Lovett, too, loses some of her agency compared to the original Victorian text, this time in both modern versions. The Penny Blood depicts an independent and greedy woman as the barber's efficient business partner, and describes their relationship as a "bond of union" (*String of Pearls*, 262) with a "love of money" (*String of Pearls*, 141) Lovett ends up murdered by Todd, poisoned for the mere reason that he does not wish to share profits made by selling the string of pearls: "dividing [...] is a process I don't intend exactly to go through. No, no, Mrs Lovett, no, no" (*String of Pearls*, 251). Nevertheless, in both contemporary versions, Mrs Lovett has a new motivation for associating with Todd: the hope of a romantic relationship. She is still a very dynamic character, and the one to suggest selling cannibalistic meat pies, thereby originating their lucrative business plan; her "capitalist ethic" and quick wit are in constant calculation of self-interest (Mollin 410). Yet all this comes to be justified by her feelings for Todd. She is depicted as having been attracted to him even before he was separated from his wife: "Always had a fondness for you, I did" ("My Friends", Sondheim and Wheeler, *Sweeney Todd*, 20). Once their business becomes successful, she begins to dream of their potential future as a couple and of domestic respectability: "But a seaside wedding / Could be devised, / Me rumped bedding / Legitimised" ("By The Sea", Sondheim and Wheeler, *Sweeney Todd*, 118). The scene for "By The Sea" even includes Toby on Mrs Lovett's dream picnic blanket, giving her a chance at motherhood and at a "proper" family—but Burton's chromatic choices decidedly mark this scene as a fantasy, as vividly unreal as its colours are garish, standing out from the main narrative's palette. The addition of a romantic longing for a conventional bourgeois existence to the financial interests of her greedy Victorian counterpart paradoxically marks a clear modern shift in contemporary ethos, in an era when falling in love and settling down is deemed a successful future. In spite of the progress women have made since the Victorian era in terms of independence and opportunities, both in the personal and the professional spheres, these contemporary versions tend towards a traditional and even reactionary vision of gender roles with both main female characters.
- 25 Sweeney Todd's relationship with Mrs Lovett is one of the most striking ways in which the protagonist has become romanticised over time. But perhaps the greatest change in translating this Victorian narrative into a contemporary story is Todd himself, as he transforms from an evil murderous barber into a tragic hero, and as the narrative's genre changes from gothic tale to revenge play. The Penny Blood presents the readership with a Manichean treatment of a bloodthirsty villain: he is given no backstory, has no motive for murdering customers apart from financial profit, and kills at random. His physical appearance is terrifying: a "long, low-jointed, ill-put-together sort of fellow, with an immense mouth and such huge hands and feet", with a "most terrific set of hair" (*String of Pearls*, 4)—the grotesque character resembles a fairy tale ogre. Furthermore, while laughter as part of the pre-symbolic stage of linguistic development²⁸ is one typically human characteristic following the Aristotelian premise

that man is a laughing animal, Todd's laugh dehumanises him in two different ways. Described as "hyena-like" (*String of Pearls*, 4), it completes the set of features depicting him as a wild and dangerous scavenger; and is also given a supernatural quality repeatedly remarked upon by various characters, who associate his laugh with a demonic creature, "scarcely [...] possible that it proceeded from mortal lips" (*String of Pearls*, 4). Surprised by this "devil noise" upon meeting the barber, Thornhill's²⁹ reaction is but one example of many heartfelt wishes to never hear it again: "Laughed! Do you call that a laugh? [...] If that's your way of laughing, I beg you won't do it any more" (*String of Pearls*, 7). Like an early Mr Hyde, Todd embodies the threat of moral and social degeneration, and his evil nature transpires in both what he looks and what he sounds like. There is no attempt to add another dimension to his actions, his words, or his appearance: he is a merciless and cruel serial killer.

- 26 In the modern versions however, Sweeney Todd acquires a certain depth, allowing a questioning of his actions and their context as the Manichean villain fades. As Mack explains, Todd "had not been *born* a villain, [...] he was himself the *victim* of a society that was guilty in treating an entire class of people as little more than a disposable source of cheap labour" (Mack 20, emphasis original): the idea of his villainous qualities being acquired rather than innate is introduced. By locating the reasons for his actions *outside* his own psyche, the narrative expands Todd's romanticisation through re-humanisation. The barber now has a tragic backstory, and Johnny Depp's portrayal on screen turns the gleeful murderer from the stage version into a melancholy heartbroken man. Presented as haunted by this succession of traumatic events, and given a psychological motivation³⁰ as well as what Aronofsky Weltman calls an "overwhelmingly good case for revenge" (Weltman 304), he is also granted a more humane dimension, as both contemporary versions imply that he can show compassion even in his murderous plans. Indeed, when a man comes into the parlour with his wife and daughter, the film makes clear that Todd glances at the little girl while singing the lines "And you'd be beautiful and pale / And look too much like her" ("Johanna (Quartet)", Burton, *Sweeney Todd*, 74:46-74:53), and proceeds to give the man a proper shave, letting him leave with his family, like a ghost image of the family Todd was deprived of. Similarly, his apprentice Toby is an instrument to Todd's shifting characterisation: violently threatened and beaten by Todd over the course of the penny blood, in the musical versions he is the apprentice of a violent rival barber. Once this rival is murdered by Todd, Toby is taken in thanks to the mother-figure Mrs Lovett, and physical abuse stops, making it easier for contemporary audiences to sympathise with the "demon barber". We are thus presented with an ambiguous character and incited to feel pity or sympathy for him in spite of the constant graphically bloody representations of his numerous crimes. He also makes clear in his "Epiphany" and throughout the plot that he wants to take revenge on Judge Turpin, and although he "in the meantime practice[s] on less honourable throats" (Sondheim and Wheeler, *Sweeney Todd*, 80) the audience can hold on to the reassurance that he will eventually stop killing as he has a goal to reach. After all, he did not intend to become a mass murderer, and as Alfred Mollin points out, this only occurs once his initial plan for revenge fails and the Judge escapes his deadly razor the first time (Mollin 406). The idea of a finite series of murders thus poses a very different threat from the potentially infinite one of *The String of Pearls*, and the sensationalist impact is reduced in favour of a gorier effect. The contemporary versions bear a different form of horror: of course, the gruesome murders and the idea of human flesh in the pies still are part of it, but the

psychological dimension of making audiences sympathise with such a murderer, and potentially finding that he has right on his side, is spine-chilling. Rather than the degenerate inhuman criminal of the original text, modern adaptations create a sense of relatability and delve into an ambiguous vision of the serial killer as potentially anyone, as the ensemble suggests: "Isn't that Sweeney there beside you?" (Sondheim and Wheeler, *Sweeney Todd*, 155), in an attempt to make sense of the concepts of individuality and identity, but also their potential loss.

"Who could see how the road would twist?" (Sondheim and Wheeler, *Sweeney Todd*, 133): completing a transmedial trajectory

- 27 Contemporary versions of the Sweeney Todd narrative are instances of "reconfiguration" rather than adaptations, as they write the original Victorian text into a different era,³¹ "victorianising" it by changing its setting, while inscribing it with modern anxieties about consumerism and psychologising it. In these versions, it is capitalist society itself that has become mad and has created a criminal, rather than the criminal being a diseased and/or inhuman "other". *The String of Pearls* might have tried to make sense of the dark potential of human nature, but Sondheim's bleaker version (and by extension, Burton's) brings ambiguity to its protagonist and extends the critique of capitalism into a satire of a mercantile society, and by doing so "rejects atavistic explanations for Sweeney's behaviour, or those theories of degeneracy associated with Max Simon Nordau" (Poore and Jones 4): Sweeney Todd is himself a victim, at the mercy of forces greater than any individual. Indeed, the "Ballad of Sweeney Todd", which invites us to "attend the tale" in the first place, concludes the story with a last ensemble scene on stage telling how Todd "served a dark and a hungry god" (Sondheim and Wheeler, *Sweeney Todd*, 156): financial profit is satirized as a modern deity, both adored and feared as it pressures people of any sort (Sweeney being in essence no different from anyone else) into servitude. Burton's adaptation offers an even darker ending, as it is the only version in which the young lovers are not seen reunited: the hopeful thread of their story is simply interrupted when Todd leaves Johanna in his parlour.
- 28 I argue that the Neo-Victorian take on the Penny Blood goes further than a rewriting, as the tale of Sweeney Todd almost cannibalizes itself: its reconfigurations go back to the original material (as they are no sequels, but "reboot" the story), but proceed to "digest" it through a new set of entrails, thereby producing a different outcome. The narrative circulates through a variety of media reflecting modern possibilities, and this circulation echoes the penny blood's circulation through society intrinsically linked with their popularity. In addition to being awarded no less than eight Tony Awards, the musical circulated through various countries for years and is still a fixture of opera houses' repertoires nowadays; the Hollywood version, too, had its share of prestigious awards and nominations.³² Keeping true to the status of popular culture introduced by the penny blood version, it seems that the sensational tale of the demon barber has been successfully transformed into a piece of contemporary Victoriana that tells us about ourselves, not unlike the penny dreadful's subversive narratives of their own contemporary society.

- 29 Finally, the character of Sweeney Todd recently completed its transmedial circulation, as it reintegrated the medium of literature in 2012 in Terry Pratchett's novel *Dodger*. In this—once again—Neo-Victorian story, Sweeney Todd is a barber but also a veteran, traumatized by the Napoleonic Wars. He suffers from posttraumatic stress disorder, which leads him to murder customers whom he believes to be dead soldiers coming back to life; and when Dodger helps arrest him, he gets him sent to Bedlam rather than to the gallows, arguing that "Mister Todd himself was a casualty of those wars, just as were the men in his cellar" (Pratchett 149). His mental health now prisoner in servitude of another "dark and vengeful god", the character is cleared of all moral responsibility for his actions, and his status as a victim is equated to his own murder victims, building on the notion of psychological trauma introduced by the twentieth-century musical narrative analysed in this essay and perpetuating a vitriolic portrait of society's governing forces. From the Victorian page, to the stage, to the screen, and back to a twenty-first century page, the tale of Sweeney Todd has come full circle, developing and enriching its critique and artistic potential as it circulates further and continues to invade our contemporary popular culture.

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NOTES

1. The term "penny bloods" designates early penny dreadful publications between the late 1830s and the 1850s, which bear a more violent tendency. For more on the penny dreadfuls, see Louis James and Peter Haining.
2. First through a variety of screen versions in the twentieth century (silent movies, horror films), which achieved relatively little success compared to their Victorian inspiration or to the Sondheim and the Burton versions—for example, the 1928 silent film *Sweeney Todd* (directed by Walter West), the 1936 slasher/horror film *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (directed by George King), or the 1998 horror television film *The Tale of Sweeney Todd* (directed by John Schlesinger).
3. The musical was awarded no less than 8 Tony Awards—short for Antoinette Perry Award for Excellence in Broadway Theatre, they are the highest distinction in American musical theatre, awarded annually since 1947. The original Broadway production of *Sweeney Todd* was nominated for 9 Tony Awards, including the most prestigious categories, such as Best Musical, Best Original Score, Best Book of a Musical, Best Direction of a Musical, etc. The 1980 original London production was also awarded 2 Olivier Awards, among which Best New Musical (the Laurence Olivier Awards are not specialised in musical theatre, but are awarded to recognise excellence in professional theatre on the London stage).
4. I use "constellation" and "image" in the Benjaminian sense: "It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation" (Benjamin 462).
5. What makes penny bloods special is how any potentially gothic thread is woven into the story with the help of sensationalism, i.e. a style of writing designed in itself to provoke strong emotional reactions, shock, and thrill its readers.
6. McGill references here Julie Brown's work "Carnival of Souls and the Organs of Horror", in *Music in the Horror Film: Listening to Fear*, edited by Neil Lerner (New York: Routledge, 2010).
7. Sometimes also referred to by its opening line, "Attend the tale of Sweeney Todd".
8. The melody stays the same, but the lyrics evolve to narrate or comment on the events as they unfold.
9. Composer Richard Rodgers and lyricist-dramatist Oscar Hammerstein II were one of the most influential and innovative musical theatre writing team, and initiated what is now considered to be the 'Golden Age' of musical theatre, in the 1940s and 1950s, and during which the ensemble frequently assumed a chorus function.
10. Cannibalistic puns such as, when Todd asks about eating priest: "Sir it's too good, at least! / Then again, they don't commit sins of the flesh, / So it's pretty fresh" (Sondheim and Wheeler, *Sweeney Todd*, 84).
11. Hammer Film Productions, a British film production company founded in 1934, is best-known for gothic horror films from the mid-1950s to the 1970s which reintroduced classic horror characters such as Count Dracula, Frankenstein, or the Mummy. The company dominated the horror film market over this period, and these productions are to this day considered as references in the horror genre.
12. This was analysed in great detail by Gilles Menegaldo in his *Sleepy Hollow* analysis, see Menegaldo.
13. *Grand Guignol* was a late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century French theatre in Paris notorious for its sensational gore, shocking stories and brutal special effects. Audience members were famously reported to faint or scream during performances (which would include graphic brain surgery on stage, murders, disfigurations...), and the proprietors claimed to always keep a doctor on hand in the theatre.

14. *The Bride of Frankenstein* (1935) was the first sequel to *Frankenstein* (1931). Both films were directed by James Whale, produced by Universal Pictures, and famously starred Boris Karloff as the Monster. These culturally significant films were added to the National Film Registry in 1991 and 1998 by the United States National Film Preservation Board, whose focus is to build a database displaying the range and diversity of America's film heritage and to increase awareness for its preservation (see <https://www.loc.gov/programs/national-film-preservation-board/about-this-program>, last accessed 27 December 2019).
15. The 1850 expanded collection, attributed to the same potential authors, was entitled *The String of Pearls; or, The Barber of Fleet Street. A Domestic Romance*.
16. Indeed, greater emphasis is put on the Sweeney Todd as the titles of virtually all adaptations since Dibdin Pitt's have included his name and/or the "demon barber" expression.
17. Temple Bar stood where Fleet Street now meets the Strand on a modern map.
18. This gateway was crucial as it gave access to the Temple area and its legal offices. It had such importance that according to the website of the City of London itself, Temple Bar was a place where since Queen Elizabeth I, tradition required the monarch to stop there in order to request permission to the Lord Mayor to enter the City—a request to which the Lord Mayor would answer by symbolically presenting the Sword of State as a sign of loyalty. See <https://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/about-the-city/history/Pages/temple-bar.aspx>, last accessed 27 December 2019.
19. *A Harlot's Progress* (1732) is a series of six paintings and engravings by William Hogarth, which depict the story of a young woman, from her arrival in London from the country to her becoming a prostitute and dying of a venereal disease.
20. *Sleepy Hollow*, directed by Tim Burton in 1999, opens with a close-up shot of a thick red liquid dripping onto a yet unidentified surface. The liquid is later identified as wax, but the aesthetics of this scene are strikingly similar to the *Sweeney Todd* opening scene in which drops of a thick red liquid gradually invade the city.
21. Matthias Davids and Roman Hinze, with Mathias Fischer-Dieskau in charge of stage set, adapted the original production by Harold Prince for the Volksoper in Vienna, Austria. The production, entitled "Sweeney Todd: Barbier des Grauens aus der Fleet Street", opened in 2013 and still runs periodically.
22. In 1825, *Tell-Tale Magazine* published the French story "A Terrible Story of the Rue de la Harpe", based on supposed Parisian police accounts of a series of murders performed on this street by a barber and a baker.
23. Penny bloods and penny dreadfuls are known to have been read out loud on the streets, in gatherings of working-class people, sharing the story with those who either could not afford to buy it or could not read.
24. One of the suspects in 1888 was actually a 23-year-old Polish barber, Aaron Kosminski. In 2014, author Russell Edwards even claimed to have proven this theory thanks to the testing of DNA found on one of the crime scenes with the help of Dr Jari Louhelainen, but their research was controversial for lack of transparency. The findings were then published in March 2019 in the *Journal of Forensic Sciences*.
25. The "From Hell" letter enclosed a piece of human kidney, and in the letter, its writer claimed to have eaten the rest of the organ.
26. According to Marina Warner in "Fee fi fo fum: The Child in the Jaws of the Story", only four of Perrault's tales do not feature cannibalism as such (Warner 160).
27. In *The String of Pearls*, Sweeney Todd's shaving parlour and Mrs Lovett's pie shop and kitchen are linked by a subterranean passage, where the remains of the bodies that have not been used for pie-making are left to rot. The passage lies under St Dunstan's Church, and the church is repeatedly described in the story as having an unbearable stench, until it is revealed that this was due to the rotting corpses underneath.

28. Pre-linguistic development refers to the stage when a child is able to manipulate precursors of symbolic skills, i.e. the pre-symbolic stage. Laughter is identified as the second step in this development, appearing right after vegetative sounds and before vocal play.

29. Thornhill is the messenger in charge of bringing the string of pearls to Johanna as a memory of Mark. He is murdered by Sweeney Todd, who then steals the jewel, at the beginning of the story.

30. Christopher Bond's play, on which Sondheim's musical and thus Burton's movie are based, is the first time that Todd is given a motive for his killing spree.

31. The penny blood set its story "when George the Third was young" (Mack 3). George III reigned from 1760 to 1820, so this opening line would situate the story towards the end of the eighteenth century, whereas the contemporary versions choose to set it in Victorian times.

32. In 2008, Tim Burton's *Sweeney Todd* was nominated for three Academy Awards and four Golden Globes.

ABSTRACTS

This essay analyses two critically acclaimed recent versions of the Sweeney Todd narrative, Stephen Sondheim's musical (1979) and Tim Burton's film (2007), both entitled *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, in the light of the original penny dreadful text *The String of Pearls: A Romance* (1846-47). I argue that rather than adaptations, these are instances of "rebooting" or "reconfiguration" as theorised by Ruth Mayer, i.e. a new medium taking over the narration in order to allow for scrutinising the workings of ideology. Thanks to the malleability of the musical genre and the new possibilities offered by the stage and screen versions, the contemporary Sweeney Todd brings to light a critique of modern consumerism as well as a reflexion on twentieth-century sensibility, and problematizes various types of social change in a Neo-Victorian take that helps us understand and frame the relationship between our Western twentieth- and twenty-first century society and its Victorian past as a dialogue rather than a nostalgic glance backwards.

Cet article analyse deux versions récentes de l'histoire de Sweeney Todd acclamées par la critique : la comédie musicale de Stephen Sondheim (1979), et le film réalisé par Tim Burton (2007), tous deux intitulés *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (à noter que le film est sorti en France sous le titre de *Sweeney Todd: Le Diabolique Barbier de Fleet Street*). Ces deux versions sont ici mises en relation avec le texte du penny dreadful original, *The String of Pearls: A Romance* (1846-47, attribué à James Malcolm Rymer). Cette analyse démontre que plutôt que de simples adaptations, ce sont des cas de « rebooting » ou « reconfiguration » d'après la définition de Ruth Mayer, c'est-à-dire l'utilisation d'un nouveau medium afin de permettre la mise en lumière et l'analyse critique d'une idéologie. Grâce à la malléabilité du genre de la comédie musicale et les nouvelles possibilités offertes par la scène ou l'écran, le Sweeney Todd contemporain présente la critique d'un consumérisme moderne et engage à la réflexion quant aux sensibilités et aux mœurs du XX^e siècle. Par son approche néo-victorienne, le récit problématise différents types de changements à l'échelle sociale, et nous permet de mieux comprendre le lien entre la société contemporaine occidentale et son passé victorien, et de l'envisager comme un dialogue plutôt que comme un simple regard vers le passé empreint de nostalgie.

INDEX

Mots-clés: transmédiatité, néo-victorien, comédie musicale, reboot, reconfiguration, circulation, penny dreadful, penny blood

Keywords: transmediality, neo-Victorian, musical, reboot, reconfiguration, circulation, penny dreadful, penny blood

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