Boz versus Bos in *Sweeney Todd*:
Dickens, Sondheim, and Victorianness

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The 1979 Stephen Sondheim/Hugh Wheeler musical *Sweeney Todd* derives (through Christopher Bond’s 1973 melodrama) from the anonymously authored *The String of Pearls* (1846–47). The novel is often attributed to Thomas Peckett Prest, who so blatantly copied Dickens that he frequently wrote under the name “Bos.” Certainly *The String of Pearls* imitates some identifiable characteristics of Dickens’s writing—outrageous characters, Pickwickian humor, and a sensational Newgate plot, like Oliver Twist’s. Yet Prest crucially leaves out Dickens’s powerful social critique. In contrast, Sondheim’s adaptation reinserts the kind of social criticism viewers associate with Dickens. It is from Dickens—and later adaptations of Dickens—rather than from the Victorian novel from which *Sweeney Todd* descends that Sondheim receives and assembles the traits that we interpret as Victorian. Sondheim intensifies the Victorianness of his play not by closely following the nineteenth-century source but by inserting details chiefly inherited from Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* and, perhaps more surprisingly, from the 1960 musical adaptation *Oliver!*. Examining Sondheim’s *Sweeney Todd* (on stage and in the 2007 Tim Burton film) in relation to *The String of Pearls* and *Oliver!* provides a potent vehicle for considering how we have come to understand Victorianness through what we read as Dickensian.

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Stephen Sondheim's award-winning musical *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* (1979) evolved through a long genealogy of adaptations—most importantly Christopher Bond's 1973 melodrama of the same name—from the now virtually forgotten serial tale of terror *The String of Pearls* (1846–47), often attributed to Thomas Peckett Prest. Ever popular, Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* has seen major new stage productions in both London (2004) and New York (2005), continuing on tour at least through 2009. The recent Tim Burton film (2007), starring Johnny Depp and Helena Bonham-Carter, has captured critical acclaim and brought new audiences to the musical through the cinema and on DVD (2008). But, despite the musical *Sweeney Todd's* decades of success, *The String of Pearls* remains largely unknown. A Newgate novel with characters and plot elements directly imitating Charles Dickens, *The String of Pearls* (unlike Dickens's novels) employs neither its comedy nor its depictions of villainy to offer significant social criticism. Yet Sondheim's masterpiece does. Partly by way of the musical's book by Hugh Wheeler and its hefty debt to Bond's play, Sondheim's adaptation reinserts the kind of critique viewers associate with Dickens. It also reinstates those aspects of the original novel that derive from Dickens and adds others that directly come from Dickens's novels or from later adaptations of Dickens's work. In bringing the Victorian tale to the current stage and screen, Sondheim and Wheeler make it seem more Victorian for us by making it seem more Dickensian.

Theater critics reviewing *Sweeney Todd* typically refer to it as "Dickensian" without going beyond that adjective. Examples from reviews of recent British and American productions include *Sweeney Todd* 's "Dickensian-laden revolving stage," as Roderic Dunnett in *The Independent* (May 24, 2004) describes the Derby Playhouse production in England's Midlands, and the "pervasive Dickensian cartoons," as Charles McNulty in *The Village Voice* (March 9, 2004) describes the New York City Opera's production of that year. Newspapers identified Dickensian qualities even more vehemently with the original Broadway opening: *The New York Times* remembers the "Dickensian social framework" from Harold Prince's 1979 production that it does not detect in John Doyle's 2005 production. Similarly, in *Newsday* Linda Winer refers to Prince's 1979 production as a "vast Dickensian epic." John Bush Jones offers a bit more when he suggests that *Sweeney Todd* reveals "that the United States today is as over-industrialized and depersonalized as Charles Dickens's London" (291). Reviews of the new Tim Burton film also recognize Dickens. According to the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune*, Timothy Spall, who plays Beadle Bamford, comes "straight out of a Dickens illustration." In *The New York Times*, A. O. Scott likens Burton's London to the set in Carol Reed's movie musical *Oliver!* While all these reviews agree that there is something Dickensian about *Sweeney Todd*, none explains precisely what characteristics they mean to invoke by that term. I say "Dickensian" because I argue that it is from Dickens—and adaptations of Dickens—that Sondheim inherits the set of characteristics that audiences read as Victorian rather than from *The Three-penny Opera* (to which Sondheim clearly owes a debt) or even from the Victorian pulp novel from which *Sweeney Todd* sprang. In fact, Sondheim magnifies the Victorianess of his show based on a Victorian work not by faithfully following the original (which was set in eighteenth-century London) but by inserting details, characters, themes, and a setting drawn largely from Dickens's novel *Oliver Twist* (1837–39) or, perhaps more significantly, from the musical adaptation *Oliver!* (London, 1960; New York, 1963).

Although no one knows for sure who wrote the blood-and-thunder story of *The String of Pearls*, historians often identify the author (or co-author) as Thomas Peckett Prest. A prolific hack writer working for the penny press, Prest spent much of his career copying Dickens, whom he imitated so blatantly that he published under the name of "Boz." While Sondheim's musical play derives from Prest's novel, Prest himself continually imitated Dickens. Novels attributed to Prest include *The Penny Pickwick* (1839), *Nickelas Nicklebery*, *Martin Guzzlewitt*, and, most tellingly, *Oliver Twiss* (1841). Although *The String of Pearls* does not directly pirate Dickens, it imitates some identifiable characteristics of Dickens's writing—such as outrageous characters, Pickwickian humor, and, most obviously, a sensational Newgate plot, like *Oliver Twist's* (1837–39). Prest deftly regurgitated Dickensian characters, plots, and titles, but crucially left out Dickens's powerful social critique. In contrast, Sondheim's adaptation emphasizes Dickensian concern for reform. Sharp class and cultural criticism in Sondheim's musical rendering of Prest's story results in a kind of re-Dickensian of it. In other words, Sondheim provides a version of Sweeney Todd that is more Boz than Bos.

What I trace through the rest of this essay are three parallel sets of relationships between the works of Sondheim, Prest, and Dickens. First, I discuss the relationship of *The String of Pearls* to Dickens's novels; second, what use *Sweeney Todd* makes of *The String of Pearls*; and, third, what *Sweeney Todd* owes to Dickens directly or through adaptations, such as *Oliver!*, even though *The String of Pearls* (already an imitation of Dickens), leaves them out. Examining Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* in relation to *The String of Pearls* and *Oliver!* provides a potent vehicle for considering how we have come to understand Victorianess through what we read as Dickensian.

A Touch of Boz's

While Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* boasts many fervent fans and many studies by musical theater scholars, few in either group have read or even know of the
novel that is the musical's ultimate literary source. This is because Sondheim identifies Christopher Bond's 1973 melodrama (also called Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street) as inspiring him. Hugh Wheeler's book for the musical follows Bond's play very closely, and it is Bond who first contributes many of the Dickensian elements I discuss here. Nevertheless, the tale originated long before either Bond or Wheeler got involved. The author of the novel The String of Pearls is often misidentified as George Dibdin Pitt, who did in fact first adapt it for the melodrama stage in 1847 at the Britannia Theatre, just before the concluding installment of the novel appeared in print; however, the novel itself was perhaps—though by no means certainly—written by Prest. The alcoholic Prest often wrote for Edward Lloyd, a successful publishing entrepreneur who created inexpensive Salisbury Square periodicals for the working class, such as The Penny Sunday Times and People's Police Gazette and Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper. Additional contenders for the novel's debated authorship are other Lloyd authors: James Malcolm Rymer, George Macfarren, Lloyd himself, or a combination, with one of them beginning it and others continuing or expanding or alternating chapters. Because Prest has been traditionally identified as author and because no critical consensus yet exists, I have for convenience attributed The String of Pearls to Prest throughout this essay.

What is certain is that The String of Pearls came out anonymously on Sundays from 1846 to 1847 in a Lloyd penny weekly, The People's Periodical and Family Library. The story filled narrow columns alongside light anec- dots, thrilling travel sketches, and recipes for rat poison. No matter what its provenance or literary merit, the novel spawned over a century and a half of wildly popular adaptation and, even for this reason alone, merits investigation. It has been made into at least four films, two TV movies, radio plays, and a ballet. British actor Tod Slaughter (a serendipitous name) was able to perform the role of Todd in a version of Pitt's stage melodrama over 4,000 times by the time he died in 1956. Also in 1956, comedian Stanley Holloway (perhaps best known for the role of Eliza Doolittle's father in My Fair Lady, both on Broadway and in film) recorded the comic music-hall favorite “Sweeney Todd: The Barber.” The myth of Sweeney Todd is so powerful that many people claim in print that the story was based on an actual case of murder and cannibalism, despite the fact that there is no evidence of this—at least, not on Fleet Street, not in London. While Dibdin Pitt touts his stage melodrama as based in truth, Prest's earlier piece is subtitled “A Romance,” underscoring its status as fiction. Sondheim renews the tradition of fictionality by subtitling his show “A Musical Thriller.”

The main character is so famous that Sweeney Todd hair salons flourish in cities across America. However, The String of Pearls is so little known as to warrant a full paragraph of summary.

In the novel's opening chapter, the barber Sweeney Todd murders a customer, the sailor Mr. Thornhill, for a valuable string of pearls. Thornhill had stopped for a shave on his way to deliver the necklace to the beautiful Johanna Oakley. They were a gift from her beloved, Mark Ingestrie, presumed drowned at sea. Thornhill's friend, Colonel Jeffrey, decides to visit Johanna instead, to break the bad news about Mark's death and to mention Thornhill's worrisome disappearance with her gift. Also noticing that Mr. Thornhill is suddenly missing (and last seen at the barber shop) is Todd's apprentice, Tobias (or "Toby") Ragg, who suspects foul play. Meanwhile, a handsome and desperately poor young man takes a job baking meat pies for the butchery and attractive widow Mrs. Lovett, whose delicious pastries are famous throughout London and whose shop is around the corner from Todd's. The peculiar job requires the young baker to stay locked in the cellars below the bakeshop and never to ask where the meat comes from. Back at the barber's, Todd recognizes that his apprentice has become suspicious and claps him into Dr. Fogg's cruel insane asylum. Colonel Jeffrey goes to the magistrate and tells him of his friend Mr. Thornhill's having vanished, last seen at Todd's barber shop. A terrible stench wafts up from the cellars of St. Dunstan's church, which stands near Todd's and Mrs. Lovett's shops, causing an official inquiry, including a visit from the magistrate whom Colonel Jeffrey had consulted earlier. In the meantime, the distraught but resourceful Johanna disguises herself as a boy and fills the now vacant position of Todd's apprentice, in order to spy on the barber. Mrs. Lovett's recently hired bake-house chef grows restive in his incarceration, and so Mrs. Lovett tells Todd that it's time to kill the young man. Unknown to Mrs. Lovett, the inquisitive young cook discovers an unspeakable secret about her meat locker. Back at Sweeney Todd's shop, the magistrate impersonates a customer; because Sweeney Todd tries to kill him instead of shave him, the magistrate knows the truth. His hidden officers seize Todd, relieving readers who are at this point worrying about Johanna's safety while she is dressed as an apprentice under Todd's control. At the same time, the brave young baker puts himself on the dumbwaiter used to carry pies from the basement bake house to the pie shop. When the next load of pies is supposed to come up, he jumps out of the dumbwaiter, crying to the hungry pie-lovers, “Mrs. Lovett’s pies are made of human flesh!” In the middle of being arrested by the magistrate, Mrs. Lovett dies of the poison Todd has secretly put in her branded so that he won't have to split the proceeds from selling the string of pearls. Johanna has come to the pie shop, too, brought there by the magistrate, the Colonel, and Toby—who had previously escaped from the madhouse and told his story to the law—so that she might be reunited with her long-lost love; indeed, the good-looking pastry cook is none other than Mark Ingestrie, thought drowned at sea. They embrace. Todd is executed at Newgate Prison.
While this summary smoothes over the novel’s interpolated stories, dropped plot lines, and rushed ending, it preserves the book’s solidly entertaining melodramatic narrative. But it does not point out the ways in which *The String of Pearls* imitates Dickens. The parallels between Prest’s Todd and Dickens’s Fagin, who both hang at Newgate, are among the most significant examples of Bos copying Boz in *The String of Pearls*. One scene in which Prest seems clearly to attempt imitating the inimitable is the scene in which Todd imagines that his apprentice, Tobias, has seen him kill a victim. The passage shows a remarkable similarity to Fagin’s discovering that Oliver has observed Fagin’s treasure box. In *Oliver Twist*, Fagin,

... laying his hand on a bread knife which was on the table, started furiously up. He trembled very much though; for, even in his terror, Oliver could see that the knife quivered in the air.

"What's that?" said the Jew. "What do you watch me for? Why are you awake? What have you seen? Speak out, boy! Quick—quick! for your life!"

"I wasn't able to sleep any longer, sir," replied Oliver, meekly. "I am very sorry if I have disturbed you, sir."

"You were not awake an hour ago?" said the Jew, scowling fiercely on the boy.

"No! No, indeed!" replied Oliver.

"Are you sure?" cried the Jew: with a still fiercer look than before: and a threatening attitude.

"Upon my word I was not, sir," replied Oliver, earnestly. "I was not, indeed, sir."

"Tush, tush, my dear!" said the Jew, abruptly resuming his old manner, and playing with the knife a little, before he laid it down: as if to induce the belief that he had caught it up, in more sport. "Of course I know that, my dear. I only tried to frighten you. You're a brave boy. Ha! ha! you're a brave boy. Oliver!" The Jew rubbed his hands with a chuckle, but glanced uneasily at the box, notwithstanding.

Prest borrows several elements from Dickens, intensifying the violence with physical contact between Todd and Toby:

In two strides Todd reached him, and clenching him by the arm he dragged him into the farthest corner of the shop, and then he stood opposite to him glaring in his face with such a demoniac expression that the boy was frightfully terrified.

"Speak!" cried Todd, "speak! And speak the truth, or your last hour is come! How long were you peeping through the door before you came in?"

"Peeping, sir?"

"Yes, peeping; don't repeat my words, but answer me at once, you will find it better for you in the end."

"I wasn't peeping, sir, at all."

Sweeney Todd drew a long breath as he then said, is a strange, shrieking sort of manner, which he intended, no doubt, should be jocose,—

...Well, well, very well; if you did peep, what then? It's no matter; I only wanted to know, that's all; it was quite a joke, wasn't it—quite funny, though rather odd, eh? Why don't you laugh, you dog? Come, now, there is no harm done. Tell me what you thought about it at once, and we will be merry over it—very merry.

(7)

Prest imitates Dickens’s characters and their relationships, dramatic situations, and dialogue. Todd’s “demonic expressions” recall the abundant devil imagery associated with Fagin, who is at once the “merry old gentleman” and a gliding, creeping, crawling “loathsome reptile” (66, 132). In both cases the criminal/proectors worry that the boys have observed evidence that could convict them. Both enjoin the boys to say what they have seen or risk losing their lives. Both then joke to control the damage of having revealed the intensity of their concern. Neither adult finally is sure he is safe from the boy’s prying.

The fun in Prest’s Todd springs not only from his being an excessively bad guy, but also from the quirkiness that we associate with Dickens’s creations. Fagin’s “villainous-looking and repulsive face is obscured by a quantity of matted red hair” (65), but Todd sports an even more outlandish coiffure. The narrator first describes the barber’s “Terroric head of hair” in one of the most memorable images from the novel: it had “the appearance of a thick-set hedge, in which a quantity of small wire had got entangled... Sweeney kept all his combs in it—some people said his scissors likewise—” (2). The irony of a barber with hair so wild, thick, and unkempt that he can store all his combs and scissors in it is funny enough, but the mad villain effect is heightened by Todd’s evil laugh. In the first scene in which a customer is about to be—in what becomes Todd’s favorite expression—“polished off,” the unfortunate says,

"What the devil noise was that?"

"It was only me," said Sweeney Todd: "I laughed."

"Laughed! Do you call that a laugh? I suppose you caught it off somebody who died of it."

(5)

In addition to Todd’s fearsome headdress and his hideous laugh, he has huge hands, mouth, feet, and a squint. His physical grotesqueness may remind some readers of Quilp, the villain from *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840–41), whose disproportionate physique and alarming merriment magnifies the effect of his villainy.

The novel includes some gentle social satire in imitation of Dickens, without his reformist agenda. Prest takes aim against feminine mawkishness when the heroine Johanna Oakley’s friend, Arabella Wilmot (whose name recalls Arabella Allen in *Pickwick*), bases all her actions and advice on silly novels.
Johanna herself is almost equally absurd in her romantic diction; for example when she realizes that she will soon hear news of her lover, Mark, she says,

‘Joy, joy! He lives, he lives! Mark Ingestre lives! Perchance, too, successful in his object, he returns to tell me that he can make me his, and that no obstacle can now interfere to frustrate our union. Time, time, float onwards on your fleetest pinions!’

(34)

Johanna’s dialogue sounds ripe for the melodrama stage, begging for appropriate gestures. One may hear echoes of the actress Mrs. Crummles from Nicholas Nickleby, whose theatrical manner of speech in everyday discourse (‘What mean you? . . . Whence comes this altered tone?’) already spoofs the diction of melodrama as her “tragic recoil” spoofs the gesture (596).

Like Dickens, Prest here pokes fun at women taken in by hypocritical evangelical ministers. These characters might well remind readers of other early Dickens. For example, Robert Mack argues that the Oakleys are based on the Varden family in the 1841 novel Barnaby Rudge (Introduction xvi). Both are (to some extent) historical novels, set around 1775. Certainly, there are parallels, including a sneaky apprentice, named Sim in Dickens and Sam in Prest. But Prest also reaches farther back in Dickens’s oeuvre, as he had already done—if the authors are the same—in The Penny Pickwick (1839). The mooping preacher and his comic cameo in The String of Pearls seem blatantly borrowed from Sam Weller’s father’s revenge against the pineapples rum-and-water swilling “shepherd” in Pickwick Papers (1836–37). In The String of Pearls, Big Ben (Mr. Oakley’s bulky Beefeater cousin) physically chastises the Reverend Mr. Lupin (and lassoes Mrs. Oakley, dangling her unharmed but furious from a hook on the wall), just as Sam Weller’s father tackles the punch-loving preacher who had long been peaching off Sam’s wife and her friends (Pickwick 444; ch. 32). Yet such imitation seems less to interrogate evangelical hypocrisy than comically to condone a misogynist rule by the paterfamilias.

Even the cannibal pie-maker has antecedents in Dickens, as Mack points out (Introduction xvii). Dickens writes of food made of human flesh, both in The Pickwick Papers and Martin Chuzzlewit (1843–44). In Dickens, the problem simultaneously plays on the readers’ anxiety about the dangers of industrial society (where impersonal machines beyond our control grind one’s meat), and on the readers’ sense of superiority to the foolishness of country rubes who believe that they will be either poisoned or eaten in the city. In Pickwick Papers, Sam Weller describes the sausage-maker who is ground up by his own “patent-never-leavin’-off sassage steam-igin’” and discovered to have been eaten by his customers only by the bits of brass button “seasonin’” (407–08; ch. 30). In Martin Chuzzlewit, Tom Pinch expresses his concern that John Westlock will worry he’s “been made meat pies of, or some such horrible thing” because he has taken so long; the novel subsequently reassures the reader that Tom does not fall “into the dens of any of those preparers of cannibalistic pastry, who are represented in many standard country legends as doing a lively retail business in the Metropolis” (544; ch. 36). Prest’s novella comes hard on the heels of both these novels, but, other than a general sense that Mrs. Lovett’s pies are just too delicious to be true, her pastries provide neither a warning against the brutality of the industrial revolution nor a ridiculing of a rural population for imagining cannibals in the metropolis.

No matter how many of Dickens’s characters or plot elements The String of Pearls imitates, the social satire has no institutional or systemic object: no workhouse, no Chancery, no Debtor’s Prison. Although we associate social criticism more strongly with Dickens’s later novels, these critiques already appear in Pickwick Papers, Nicholas Nickleby, and Oliver Twist. In The String of Pearls, the only serious indictment of social evil is in the depiction of Dr. Fogg (from whose madhouse the apprentice Toby escapes), who incarcerates and kills patients for a fee from their families; nevertheless, his gothic asylum seems less a protest than a plot device.

Meet the Beadles

The most serious way in which Sondheim’s Sweeney Todd derives more from Dickens than Prest is in its class commentary. A prime example is “A Little Priest,” in which Mrs. Lovett and Sweeney Todd sing gleefully as they decide to eliminate the corporeal evidence of his murders by using his victims’ corpses to provide meat for her pies, which an unsuspecting clientele will happily eliminate to their mutual profit. This song makes the musical’s most explicit statement that Sweeney Todd turns the tables on the musical’s villainous judge and beadle so that, although “The history of the world . . . Is those below serving those up above,” now “those above will serve those down below” (108). In this respect, Sondheim’s show recalls Dickens more than Prest, who makes no attempt to depict Todd’s murders or Mrs. Lovett’s pie-making as a symbolic reversal of social inequities. There is some irony, however, in the fact that the expensive middle-class, middle-brow amusement of this particular Broadway musical criticizes class hierarchy and the mistreatment of the working man, while the original working-class entertainment of this particular “penny dreadful” novel does not. While Sally Ledger points out that Dickens’s use of the aesthetics of melodrama serves the aesthetics of class protest in Pickwick Papers and Oliver Twist (101), that process does not extend to The String of Pearls. In the novel, most of Todd’s victims, like
himself, are small tradesmen, shop-keepers, farmers, and service providers, instead of the musical’s corrupt judge and deceitful beadle. Prest restricts his criticism to schoolgirl sentimentality, evangelical hypocrisy, and foolish fashion, rather than abuse of power or exploitation of poverty. In Prest’s world, law and justice coincide: the criminal barber is caught by the brave and clever magistrate Sir Richard and his officers, who serve the public faithfully and at personal risk. The heroine Johanna, her sailor boyfriend Mark, Toby the apprentice, and their friend the Colonel help. Public health is insured by Mrs. Lovett’s exposure; order is restored by Todd’s arrest. This is not a radical aesthetic. In Sondheim’s musical, Prest’s mercenary brute has become a law-abiding family man who first seeks justice and then retribution solely against the people who directly and horribly wronged him. Only when Todd realizes how utterly he and his family have been mangled and mistreated by the law, which should have protected them, does he take revenge against everyone. This addition of Sweeney’s motivation inserts a large measure of social protest into a story that had none.

Sondheim’s embittered Sweeney Todd gains the audience’s sympathy immediately. He sings in the gripping melody of “No Place Like London” his heart-felt grief for his lost life and love, and of his hatred of the corrupt judge who transported the honest barber on a trumped up charge in order to rape his unprotected wife, Lucy. This Todd yearns for his daughter Johanna, trapped in the judge’s house as his ward and subjected to her supposed benefactor’s unseemly advances. The result of these motivations is Todd’s appeal and our identification with him. We pity him and want him to succeed in bringing the vile judge to justice. Because of this sympathy, Sweeney Todd’s rise and fall—even after he has become a serial murderer—take on the grandeur of tragedy, allowing Sondheim’s extraordinary music to enter opera repertoire, with performances by the Houston Grand Opera (1984), the New York City Opera (1984, 2004), the Chicago Lyric Opera (2002), and the Royal Opera House at Covent Garden (2002) (Grout 750).

None of this depth comes from The String of Pearls. The character that Prest creates in the novel is pure melodrama villainy: motiveless, malevolent, and over the top. Prest tells us nothing of Todd’s origin. The barber has no reason to kill people in general and none to kill anyone in particular, other than innate, overwhelming malignancy and greed; he steals from almost all his victims, mostly hats, canes, wallets, and jewelry, in preparation for an early retirement. The young Johanna, who has become Todd’s daughter in Sondheim, is in Prest an unrelated ingeneue, the daughter of a spectacle-maker, whose plot intersects with Todd’s when he steals the eponymous string of pearls. Prest’s Todd has no wife, no child, no sentimental attachment of any kind. In the very first installment, he murders several customers with great relish, one for the pearls, another for a cane. He beats his young apprentice Toby and extorts his silence by threatening the destruction of the lad’s hard-working mother. Before long, he even tries to poison a dog.

Sondheim’s Todd, on the other hand, is never a ridiculous figure. All the humor associated with him comes from witty dialogue and song lyrics, usually with the lusty Mrs. Lovett. The plot gives him ample motivation to change from a loving husband and father to a murderer dissociated from the horror of his crimes. The rage of Sondheim’s Sweeney so overtakes him and his killing so hardens him that he is able to kill his mad wife, Lucy (without recognizing her), in his rush to get at the judge. Indeed, he nearly kills his disguised daughter, Johanna. While he begins killing out of a justifiable desire for revenge, he ends up reveling in the bloodbath. The contrast between the coldly executed reiterated murders and the beautiful song “Johanna” that he sings while slitting his victims’ throats further affects our reaction to Sweeney’s crimes, which develop a kind of tragically ritual inevitability. Besides the addition of his just motive for retribution, music elevates Sondheim’s Sweeney beyond the bogeyman of Prest’s.

“Times is hard. Times is hard,” sings Mrs. Lovett to Todd, in a direct echo of the title Hard Times, suggesting that, while Mrs. Lovett arrives in some respects unchanged from novel to musical, in others, she seems more Dickensian than Prestian (37). Her name and occupation as cannibal pie-maker remain intact. But the comical character that Angela Lansbury originated on Broadway is a cheery, maternal, fast-talking, opportunistic, and lusty woman in her forties or fifties. She convinces us that using the free meat from Todd’s tonsorial parlor is merely practical business sense: “Waste not, want not,” she says. The novel’s Mrs. Lovett is nubile, beautiful, aloof, and diabolic. Prest’s character imprisons and enslaves handsome young workers, planning to have them murdered as soon as they figure out the business. Rather than seizing a fortuitous opportunity, she operates with icy premeditation. The novel describes her as “Buxom, young, and good-looking,” traits she uses to ensnare her hapless helpers (26). Still, if the unfortunate young men were more alert or less hungry (she entices them as much with the promise of all the pies they can eat as with her personal charms), the unlucky cooks would have noticed that “her smile was cold and uncomfortable. . . . the set smile of a ballet-dancer” (27).

While Prest’s chilly femme fatalé serves primarily as a monstrous vehicle for the story’s cannibal horror, Sondheim’s more complicated Mrs. Lovett pushes the murderous plot along through bourgeois aspirations for lace and a slightly singed harmonium. In her down-to-earth motherly manner, Mrs. Lovett even takes the orphaned Toby under her wing; she pities, feeds, and puts him to work serving her customers in the pie-shop, taking care that he continue without knowledge or access to the nefarious nature of the business. He is not Todd’s apprentice. Todd, Mrs. Lovett, and Toby live together,
parodying the bourgeois family and cut-throat aspirations of upward mobility. Through their unorthodox entrepreneurship, Todd and Lovett provide new clothes and a comfortable living for all three. The used harmonium that appears in their parlor in Act II stands as a particularly prominent reward for their successful entry to a state of financial security through a seemingly respectable business. Mrs. Lovett as a middle-aged, middle-class anti-mother recalls Mrs. Bumble from both *Oliver Twist* and *Oliver!*—more than Prest’s cold dominatrix. The musical’s Mrs. Lovett shares with her Dickensian predecessor a cloy courtship, a habit of spousal manipulation, and a relationship based on a combination of lust and avarice; both women either misuse or do not fulfill their maternal roles vis-à-vis the boys Tobias Ragg and Oliver Twist—surely the ur-orphans here. But I stress the debt of Sondheim’s musical to Lionel Bart’s musical *Oliver!* over the debt to Dickens’s novel because, for the 1979 Broadway audience, Mrs. Bumble already exists as a stage type—middle-aged, hypocritically maternal, very materialistic, somewhat plump, and vocalizing—so that her appearance in *Sweeney Todd* seems more Victorian to a theater-going audience than would the fiendish, tantalizing ice queen of Prest’s story.

But the mock-happy bourgeois family that Todd, Lovett, and Toby compose goes sour by the end of the Sondheim play in a way that is neither Prestian nor Dickensian. Toby wants to protect his “mother” from his “father,” whom he perceives as a violent danger to the compliant Mrs. Lovett, whom he wants for himself. All this is managed in the song “Not While I’m Around,” at first a tender sort of declaration by Toby that he will always protect his adoptive mother. Once it becomes clear that he means to protect her from Todd, the tender way in which the simple-minded adolescent has been resting his head on Mrs. Lovett’s bosom seems infected not only with the reasonable suspicions that the plot provides, but also with some obvious Oedipal desires to replace the father, whose relations with the mother, according to Freud, appear to a witnessing child as violence. In this case, of course, Todd will actually kill Mrs. Lovett, once he realizes that she has deceived him about the fate of his wife, Lucy. Mrs. Lovett’s silence about Lucy’s identity inadvertently helps to cause the madwoman’s death, since Todd kills the anonymous mad beggar woman—who turns out to be his wife—just to rid himself of a nuisance. And Toby will fulfill the Oedipal fantasy by killing Todd in a deranged but belated effort to keep his beloved “mother” safe.

A possible antecedent hovering in cultural memory here is Bill Sikes’s horrific murder of Nancy in both *Oliver Twist* and in the musical *Oliver!* The adaptation eliminates *Oliver Twist*’s Rose Maylie from the plot altogether, making Nancy the closest thing Oliver gets to a viable mother.28 Magnifying this view of a maternal Nancy in *Oliver!* is the boy’s singing “Where is Love?” The context of this song (a lonely orphaned child forced to sleep among coffins) makes clear that Oliver really asks, “Where is my mother?” In “I’d do Anything,” Oliver expresses his devotion to Nancy. She genially teases Oliver and the Artful Dodger by singing a list of questions that test the limits of what they are willing to do for her, culminating with, “Even fight my Bill?” While the Artful Dodger artfully dodges the question with one of his own, “What, fisticuffs?” Oliver implies his readiness to defend her with childlike acuality by singing that he’d do anything just for her smile.30 However, unlike the adolescent Toby (generally played on stage by an adult), Oliver is only a nine-year-old. He can’t do anything at all to protect Nancy, and—properly repressing any Oedipal urge—certainly can’t kill Sikes.31

Another strong example of how the show *Sweeney Todd* inserts or alters familiar characters from Dickens to establish itself as a Victorian tale of class struggle in Dickensian terms is Beadle Bamford, who is imported straight out of *Oliver Twist* or perhaps just *Oliver!*. The beadle barely exists in *The String of Pearls*. A very minor unnamed character, he is a self-important functionary attached to St. Dunstan’s church who enters the story during the investigation into the stink wafting up from the ecclesiastical cellars, which happen to be adjacent to Mrs. Lovett’s basement. *Oliver Twist*’s beadle, Mr. Bumble, is a much more important character. Recurring through most of the novel, he reports Oliver to the parish board for requesting “more” and then dispatches the lad to Mr. Sowerby, the undertaker. He marries the Widow Corney for her “six teaspooons, a pair of sugar-tongs, and a milk-pot” (240). Later, when his misdeeds and those of Mrs. Bumble are discovered, before he is sent to his own poorhouse, he utters the novel’s famous assessment of the British legal system, “The law is an ass” (357). His presence emphasizes a vision of a Victorian world in which petty officials keep other people in their places and puff their own minimal importance. He carries out the edicts of an unjust system, and he does so while cherishing his perks and his authority over the powerless. Likewise, Sondheim’s sycophantic beadle enjoys lord- ing it over the poor. But the evil of Sondheim’s beadle far exceeds that of Dickens’s or Lionel Bart’s. Sondheim’s beadle salaciously enjoys advising and abetting the corrupt and perverse Judge Turpin. He physically threatens Johanna’s beauty and wrings her pet bird’s neck. He directly assists the judge in raping Lucy. From *Oliver!* to *Sweeney Todd*, the Beadle’s shift from bumbling to brutal intensifies Sondheim’s bitter indictment of law, no longer merely the “ass” we have seen in Dickens but the catalyst for unspeakable carnage. While the show *Oliver!* gives the Beadle a solo and a duet, making it a proportionally larger role than *Sweeney Todd*’s Beadle (who has a duet and a trio), the fact that *Sweeney Todd* includes a Beadle as a prominent character, when the original story had none of significance, is remarkable. Again our sense of Victorian culture is so influenced by Dickens—and by
adaptations of Dickens—that a musical version of a Victorian novel requires a large singing beadle.

**Depp and Debasement**

Although Sondheim’s *Sweeney Todd*’s successful crossover from musical theater to opera might have seemed surprising, the crossover to a pop culture horror movie might seem even less likely. Do slasher-film fans generally overlap much with musical theater buffs? Previous musical horror films are often campy send-ups, such as *Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975) and *Little Shop of Horrors* (1986), which rely on ridiculing horror movie conventions. Tim Burton’s *Sweeney Todd* takes both its horror and its music very seriously. While Sondheim’s musical has appealed both to middle-brow musical theater audiences and to high-brow opera audiences, for the first time it is also attracting much larger popular culture audiences. Because of Johnny Depp, fans of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* series and his other films flock to it, in a sense returning the movie musical to the story’s original function as working-class entertainment, whether for the readership of Lloyd’s *People’s Periodical and Family Library* or for the audiences at the transpontine Britannia Theatre, Hoxton, where Dildin Pitt’s dramatization first played in 1847 (Richards 147). In addition, a Tim Burton film starring Johnny Depp raises expectations about a certain kind of gothic effect, macabre humor, and sex appeal, as well as excellent film-making. These expectations attract a considerably younger audiences than would ever attend an opera, a concert at Lincoln Center, or a Broadway show, appealing to the same age demographics that read comic books and see Johnny Depp in *From Hell*.34

Like the stage musical, the film also borrows Dickensian features in order to intensify its Victorianess. For example, Toby is presented as a child, like nine-year-old Oliver, rather than as an adolescent. Dialogue added to the film indicates that Toby is from the workhouse, an innovation for filmgoers who apparently expect that all Victorian orphans come from workhouses—like Oliver. In this respect, Burton’s film recalls King’s 1936 film *Sweeney Todd*, which goes so far as to interpolate a scene directly from *Oliver Twist*: in both King’s and Burton’s films, it is the beadle who first brings parish boy Tobias as apprentice to Todd’s shop.56 One effect of Burton’s Toby being a little boy is that, when the angelic-looking boy soprano and the fetching Mrs. Lovett sing “Not While I’m Around,” the Oedipal significance of the stage play is largely muted; perhaps an older teenage apprentice’s singing with his head on Bonham-Carter’s breast instead of Angela Lansbury’s might look less like Freudian family dynamics and more like a potential ménage-à-trois. So while Bonham-Carter’s Mrs. Lovett at times seems less like Mrs. Bumble and more like Prest’s attractive original, the film’s Tobias Ragg resembles Oliver Twist more than ever.

The 2007 film concludes even more bleakly than the 1979 play. Focusing on the grisly demise of Todd as his blood streams over his dead wife, the ending offers no glimpse of the fate of Johanna and her lover. Although, like the stage play, the musical film punishes evil and hypocrisy in high places (and, like the novel, it punishes Todd’s and Mrs. Lovett’s mass murder), the film goes even further than the stage play in moving outside melodrama’s generic feature of restoring order. Although evil is punished, in no way does good appear to triumph. In the stage musical, the adolescent Toby’s surprise murder of Todd seems tragically appropriate—not only is justice served, and not only does he save his own life, but he avenges Mrs. Lovett (in whom he still believes), and becomes a man, albeit a demented one. But in the movie, depressingly and disturbing, we see the child Toby/Oliver fill this role, as though the incorruptible Oliver had finally yielded to the depraved influence of Fagin and Sikes. We have gone from *The String of Pearls*, in which the law properly upholds justice; to the stage musical, in which Todd wreaks his own terrible vengeance on the law, with the ultimate result that the new generation will inherit a world rid of both the corrupt institutions and the vitiated avenger; to the film, in which, as a result of too-extravagant retribution, the young lovers become irrelevant, and even the child is debased.

In film and on stage, Sondheim uses his music and lyrics to show us the horrors of Dickensian drama without the sentimentality, the humor turned cynical instead of sweet. The stock characters of Victorian melodrama join with a plot that indict social institutions guilty of wantonly victimizing a helpless population. None of this critique comes from Prest, but much is familiar from Dickens. It is from Dickens—and later rewritings of Dickens—rather than from the Victorian novel from which *Sweeney Todd* descends that Sondheim assembles the traits that we interpret as Victorian. Sondheim and his collaborators intensify the Victorianess of his play derived from a Victorian novel not by closely following the source but by inserting details chiefly inherited from Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* and, perhaps more surprisingly, from Mr. Bolt’s adaptation. Sondheim’s reworking of Bos’s imitation of Boz yields a powerful locus for representations of Victorianess and the Dickensian, which audiences now read as the same thing. Ultimately, Sondheim makes Prest’s tale current by making it seem more Victorian; he rewards our expectations that a Victorian story will be socially significant, based on our experience of Dickens as the quintessential Victorian novelist and *Oliver!*, as the quintessential neo-Victorian musical.
NOTES

1. See Linda Winer. The reason for this shift in critical opinion from the original 1979 Broadway production to the recent Doyle-directed productions on the West End and Broadway has largely to do with Doyle's remarkable innovation of having the actors also provide the instruments while on stage. Since this significant break from the melodramatic tradition explored in the original production reduces its Dickensian qualities, my analysis will apply more obviously to the 1979 production, which—despite the striking inventiveness of the most recent staging—will remain definitive.

2. See Covert.


4. Early critics of Sondheim's Sweeney Todd recognized its debt to the Brecht-Weill musical The Threepenny Opera (Berlin 1928), which debuted in an English adaptation by Mark Blitzstein on Broadway in 1954. Certainly the connection is there: not only the murderous anti-hero, the murky staging, the Victorian backdrop, the low-life cast, the dark humor, but also and more importantly the class struggle, the cultural critique, and the alienating effect of horror mixed with pathos, beautiful music, and humor. See Richard Eder in the New York Times (March 2, 1979). Among other scholars who explore Sweeney Todd's Brechtian qualities are John Bush Jones (290–93), Scott McMillin (29–30), Joanne Gordon (184–88), and Thomas Adler (40–42).

5. Dickens first became famous for his Sketches by Boz (1836). As any reader of Roland Barthes might be tempted to say, what a difference there is between 's' and 'z'! My thanks go to Elsie Michie for helping me make this connection. However, an analysis informed by S/Z of how Boz refashions castrates the masterpieces of Boz and how that might be interesting in terms of gender and semiotics is far beyond the scope of this essay.

6. Useful criticism on Sondheim includes studies by Stephen Banfield; Geoffrey Block; Sandor Goodhart; and Joanne Gordon, Art Isn't Easy and Stephen Sondheim: A Casebook.

7. See Gordon, Art Isn't Easy for a close analysis comparing these texts (221–23, 227–28).

8. See, for example, Bond's introduction to Sondheim's published libretto (2). See also, Louis James (162).

9. See Graham Law for a very helpful historical study (21).

10. Helen Smith argues against Prest and for James Malcolm Rymer as author of The String of Pearls (21–28). Dick Collins rejects that idea in his Introduction to the 2003 Wordsworth Press edition of Sweeney Todd; or, The String of Pearls, suggesting instead that Prest and Rymer each contributed revisions to a text started by an as yet unidentified writer (vii–viii); in his revised 2010 introduction, he argues more firmly for co-authorship with Rymer. Robert Mack also points to George Macfarren and Lloyd himself as possible writers (Sweeney Todd xxxi).

11. Despite the two-dimensional characters, the disjointed plot, the episodes that lead nowhere, the characters left dangling, and the very abrupt ending, the novel creates a phenomenally popular bogeyman whose longevity exceeds Dracula's and comes within 30 years of Frankenstein's.

12. There have been many versions of this play. See Malcolm Morley for casting in the initial performances at the Britannia and a substantial list of later plays based on Pitt's. Morley reports on wholesale passages of Pickwick (specifically 'The Madman's Manuscript') interpolated into Pitt's play as printed and performed at various times (92–93).

13. My thanks go to Professor Dick Stein for alerting me to the wonders of Stanley Holloway and sending me this song on tape.

14. The closest "true story" of a Parisian barber-murderer in cahoots with a pastry chef neighbor was republished in 1824 as "A Terrific Story of the Rue de la Harpe, Paris" in The Tell Tale Fireside Companion and Amusing Instructor, a London magazine. The Newgate Calendar's Scottish caisson clan leader Sweeney Beane, who lived in a cave and dined for decades off unwary travelers, is also cited as a model. Other possible antecedents include the myth of Proane and Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus. See Mack (Wonderful 159–65).

15. See Gerould for more on why Sondheim calls it "A Musical Thriller" (7–8).


17. One can't help but wonder if Stanley Greenberg, the screenwriter of Soylen Green (1973), heard echoes of Mark's cry when he adapted Harry Harrison's short story and added the cannibal plot in the film's famous last line, "Soylen Green is people!"

18. In his introduction to the novel, Mack points out that the phrase "I'll polish him off!"—the exclamation most associated with Sweeney Todd—originates in Dibdin Pitt's 1847 stage melodrama adaptation (xxxii). However, the wording comes from the novel, when Todd tells Colonel Jeffrey that when Thornhill had come for a shave, he had "polished him off" (24). The joke is already there in that the Colonel responds with the question "What do you mean by polishing him off?" (24).

19. Valentine Cunningham points out that such scenes are common in the period (190–99).

20. In Little Dorrit, Dickens again refers to cannibal pie-making, when Mrs. F.'s aunt becomes the center of rumors among "credulous infants" that she had sold herself to a pie-maker to be "made up" into pies (853; bk. 2, ch. 34). Although the Penguin edition's endnote suggests that the popularity of F. Hazleton's stage adaptation Sweeney Todd, The Barber of Fleet Street; or, The String of Pearls might be behind this comment (1984), Hazleton's version was first performed later, about 1865 at the Old Bower Saloon, Stangate Street, Lambeth (Mack, Introduction xxiii).

21. John Bush Jones points correctly to Sweeney Todd's turning The Threepenny Opera's "metaphorical cannibalism to actual cannibalism" (293).

22. This plot change comes from Bond's 1973 play.

23. For Victorian melodrama, see Michael Booth; Bratton et al.; Elaine Hadley; and Peter Brooks. To a theater historian, Victorian melodrama is a genre of plays.
including songs or musical underscoring that allowed performance outside the patent houses of Drury Lane and Covent Garden (where Shakespeare and other "legitimate" or non-musical plays could be performed). Melodramas were characterized by sensational story lines, stock characters, a lack of moral ambiguity, good conquering evil, and emotion over intellect; in fact, the music that defines the genre helps to manipulate the audience's emotional response. However, Sondheim does not seem to have that specific genre of melodrama in mind, nor does he use the term as it appears in common parlance, suggesting the overly dramatic. He defines it "simply as being high theater," "louder than life—in emotion, in subject, and in complicity of plot": he sees little difference between melodrama and tragedy (Gerould 3).

24. Likewise, Ralph Nickleby causes his son Smike's death in ignorance of his true identity. Such mistaken identity tragedy is the stuff melodrama is made of, just as in its comic form it is a staple of farce.

25. Joanne Gordon also makes this observation (Art Isn't Easy 220).

26. For a feminist reading of Mrs. Lovett and Johanna, see Mary Jo Lodge 90–94.

27. For a Brechtian reading, comparing her to Mother Courage, see Adler 42.

28. Helena Bonham Carter's interpretation of Sondheim's Mrs. Lovett harks back to Prentis's in that she is younger in the film and, in spite of the pale makeup, pretty. The Tim Burton film places the harmonium in her parlor from the beginning, so that—while just as funny—it loses its value as a symbol of their upward mobility.

29. In the novel, because Fagin and Sikes are—in Juliet John's terms—hot and cold sides of the same villain (9), it is as much Fagin as Sikes who kills Nancy in the bedroom, a murder directly resulting from Nancy's motherly protection of Oliver. The musical mitigates Fagin's guilt, but the parallels remain.

30. In some productionss Oliver sings this line to Nancy, in some to Bet, in some to both; but, as Bet is a junior version of Nancy, the audience understands through these lines how Oliver feels about the older girl.

31. Toby in the Tim Burton film seems almost as young as Oliver in the musical play and movie, suggesting an intensification of Oliver's influence. See below for more analysis of this point.

32. Sondheim also says that his initial instinct was to write it as an opera (Gerould 8).

33. Sweeney Todd doesn't fit most horror film formulas. See Clover 231–40.

34. In December 2007, I heard another member of the audience whispering to her companion, "It's a musical! Did you know it's a musical? It's a musical!" For more about the Doyle productions and the Burton film, see Weltman. See also Calderazzo on Doley.

35. In New York, David Edelstein writes that the sweet-voiced young actor Ed Sanders "splits the difference between Oliver Twist and the Artful Dodger."

36. See Richards 139–59, for a very helpful analysis of King's film.

37. In the film, our last view of a possibly traumatized Johanna is when Todd unaccountably lets her live, still alone in his tonsorial parlor. We never see the young lovers reunite. In the play, Todd was still intent on killing Johanna (whom he thinks is a boy) before he rushes away in response to screams from the basement. Johanna and her lover show up below stairs together, clinging to each other, to see what has happened.

38. This is the topic of my current book project about Victorian materials adapted to Broadway musical theater, to be called "Victorians on Broadway: The Afterlife of Victorian Literature on the American Musical Stage, 1951–2000."

WORKS CITED


Dickens’s Immaterial Culture of Hats and The Pickwick Papers

Mark M. Hennelly, Jr.

Typified by Pickwick’s alteration over his nightcap in the Fleet, The Pickwick Papers provides a “diffusion of hats [and] bonnets” that perform proverbial, idiomatic and slang, class, gender, moral, psychological, and popular-culture roles. Dickens’s immersion in the worlds of melodrama and the carnivalesque gives some clarifying context to his many hat performances, as do examples from his other works, relevant articles from Household Words and All the Year Round, and Carlyle’s influence in Sartor Resartus. The result is not so much an exposed of Dickens’s response to Victorian material culture as his exposure of the immaterial culture of hats. In fact, Dickens teaches readers how to do things with hats and even how hats themselves do things as his characters meaningfully obey, test, and violate Victorian hat codes and their cultural messages. Three sustained examples—Sam’s lost hat adventure and consequent kissing game with Mary, Pickwick’s exposing his nightcap to Miss Witherfield in the Great White Horse Inn, and, most prominently, Pickwick’s chasing his hat in a field near Chatham barracks—significantly demonstrate these issues.

There are very few moments in a man’s existence when he experiences so much ludicrous distress, or meets with so little charitable commiseration, as when he is in pursuit of his own hat.—Charles Dickens, The Pickwick Papers