Contagion of crime

A poem that appeared in *Punch* in December 1862 entitled ‘The Song of the Garotter’ expresses the way in which garotting was equated with underhand thuggee:

H, meet me by moonlight alone,
And then I will give you the hug,
With my arm round your neck tightly thrown,
I’m as up to the work as a Thug.

The illustration to *Punch*’s song highlights the vulnerability of the individual. As Jennifer Davis notes in her classic study of the 1860s garotting panic, ‘*Punch* added a biological dimension to the composite picture being drawn of the dangerous classes (thirty years before Cesare Lombroso) by invariably portraying convicts in its cartoons as beetle-browed, simian-featured louts’.¹ In the illustration, the characters of the sinister and even carnivorous garotter and the fragile, somewhat foppish, gentleman pictorially prefigure H.G. Wells’s predatory, chthonic Morlocks and decadent Eloi in his novella *The Time Machine* of 1895. As Daniel Pick notes of the 1870s, the ‘condition of England question was now centrally concerned with the condition of the English body’.² Yet such apprehensions were very much alive in the 1850s and early 1860s, as demonstrated by the illustration in *Punch* (which is representative of many such images). The obsession with masculine fitness and the health of the nation was quite likely responsible for stoking the fascination with street violence, despite the downturn in crime which historians have observed.
At the same time, images from melodrama were deployed in the creation of the garotter-villain on stage. Jennifer Jones shows how actors playing the villain on the Victorian stage would blacken their faces and apply wrinkles, which though they ‘may seem a strange characteristic for a villain’ were ‘thought to be the traces left on a face that was perpetually fixed in the expression of anger or hatred’. She has related this observation to Watts Phillips's portrayal of villainy in *A Ticket of Leave: A Farce in One Act* (1862) – the only secondary reference to the garotting farces – in which Quiver declares of the appearance of a guest who he suspects is secretly a ticket-of-leave man: ‘What a farce – there’s a criminal in every wrinkle, and it's full of them!’ The extract from the play also suggests that the image of the sinister, frowning garotter (an impression created by the media) possibly found its way onto the stage. The concern with degeneration, heightened by elements of melodrama, sparked a culture of self-defence, a manly response to a danger that was perceived not only to emanate from further down the social scale but also from abroad. The attempt to conjure up and then physically contain foreign and antiquated forms of violence was apparent in Watts Phillips’s farce: ‘Servants are the vipers we warm in our bosoms [...] “There are traitors in your house! You have a Guy Fawkes in your cellar!” [...] The reign of terror is inaugurated, and garotted or guillotined, what does it matter?’ These acts of violence stood in contrast to new middle-class ideals of civilized behaviour and were the ‘shadows’ of bourgeois refinement. Through humour, the author invites his audience to link garotting to images of revolutionary violence in order to incite unease in the minds of his audience that the disturbances initiated by the aggressive lower classes, the ticket-of-leavers, could have far-reaching effects if unchecked.

In the winter of 1862, readers of *All the Year Round* were invited to ‘consider the great analogy between crime and disease’ and, like the *Illustrated London News*, to adopt the view that ‘like disease, [crime] occasionally takes an epidemic form’. Crime has often been likened to a disease, an attack on the ‘body politic’, but the metaphorical link between sewage and disease to garotting was a particularly explosive synthesis during the mid-1850s and early 1860s. The garotting panic surfaced in the wake of the cholera outbreak of 1854 and the Great Stink of 1858, when the causes of crime as well as the causes of cholera were repeatedly debated. Julia Kristeva has famously argued that an abject object which has been cast out can haunt the perpetrator of its expulsion. Building on Kristeva’s theory, Anne McClintock’s *Imperial Leather* posits that abject zones of conflict and social groups can represent