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Christmas in the Workhouse: Staging Philanthropy in the Nineteenth-Century Periodical

I. Introduction: Contextualising the Workhouse Christmas

In 1857 *Punch* published a satirical letter that meditated upon the criminal excesses of the workhouse Christmas. The writer, who adopts the persona of ‘Another London Scoundrel’, describes picking up his morning paper, only to be assailed by the ‘sickly sentimentality’ of reports detailing the Christmas dinner enjoyed by paupers.¹ The paupers in Marylebone workhouse had apparently consumed ‘roast beef “without bone”, and no end of plum-pudding’.² In disgust, the writer exclaims that ‘[t]he columns of newspapers steamed like an alderman’s kitchen; and that with Christmas dinners to Christmas paupers!’³ This idea of the ‘alderman’s kitchen’ connects the workhouse to notions of excess, luxury, and indulgence. J.A.R. Pimlott notes that, in the Victorian period, the significance of Christmas lay in the ‘emotional appeal’ of ‘the traditional virtues of neighbourliness, charity and goodwill’.⁴ In begrudging the expense of extra food rations, this Scrooge-like ‘Scoundrel’ violates the charitable spirit of Christmas.⁵

1. ‘Christmas in the Workhouse’, *Punch*, 3 January 1857, p. 1.

2. ‘Christmas in the Workhouse’, p. 1.

3. ‘Christmas in the Workhouse’, p. 1.

4. J. A. R. Pimlott, *The Englishman’s Christmas: A Social History* (Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1978), p. 85. As Nadja Durbach points out, ‘Christmas was a time [for Victorians] to practice what they viewed as the quintessentially British values of domesticity, benevolence, and hospitality through extending the comforts of the home to those less fortunate’. See Nadja Durbach, ‘Roast Beef, the New Poor Law, and the British Nation, 1834–63’, *Journal of British Studies*, 52.4 (October 2013), 963–89 (p. 967).

5. Neil Armstrong notes that ‘[b]y the early nineteenth century, England had a long tradition of providing for and treating the poor during the festive season. [...] The first recorded evidence of Christmas Charity in England dates

Punch's letter satirizes wealthy misers, but at the same time draws attention to the cultural currency of the workhouse Christmas.⁶ The details of the pauper Christmas dinner were widely reported in the press; as this 'London Scoundrel' suggests, the pages of contemporary newspapers did indeed 'steam' with descriptions of workhouse food.

The history of the workhouse Christmas dinner is fraught with conflict. As Nadja Durbach points out, '[b]y 1834, the provision of roast beef at Christmas and other festive occasions had become an established prerogative of the poor'.⁷ The New Poor Law's abolition of the Christmas meal thus seemed to be 'at variance with age-old traditions' of providing seasonal treats to the needy.⁸ In addition to prohibiting a Christmas meal paid for by the public purse, the Poor Law Commissioners also banned treats paid for by private individuals, on the grounds that this would render the condition of the pauper more desirable than that of the independent labourer.⁹ A short article published in the *Lancaster Gazette* in 1836 articulates the public outrage felt over the abolition of the dinner:

Shame! Shame! – Last week the Guardians of the Bath Union resolved that the usual

from the medieval period'. Neil Armstrong, *Christmas in Nineteenth-Century England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), p. 99. For a history of Christmas, see Pimlott, *The Englishman's Christmas*.

6. Tara Moore suggests that '*Punch*'s Christmas satire frequently attacked the uncharitable middle class by showcasing the voice of a misanthropist and allowing the reader to judge the unattractive result for herself'. Tara Moore, *Victorian Christmas in Print* (New York, NY: Palgrave, 2009), p. 71.

7. Durbach, 'Roast Beef', p. 970.

8. Durbach, 'Roast Beef', p. 971. The decision to cancel Christmas was an unpopular one; as Norman Longmate suggests, '[n]othing did more to harm the public image of the workhouse than the way in which the Poor Law Commissioners treated Christmas'. Norman Longmate, *The Workhouse* (London: Temple Smith, 1974), p. 221.

9. Durbach, 'Roast Beef', p. 967. M. A. Crowther notes that, '[c]harity was not permitted to enter the workhouse without a struggle. The Royal Commission of 1832 had not objected to charitable effort on behalf of the helpless inmates, but the Poor Law Commissioners disliked all public intrusion into the workhouses because of the possible disruption of "discipline"'. M. A. Crowther, *The Workhouse System 1834–1929* (London: Methuen, 1983), p. 68.

Christmas dinner of beef and pudding should be given to the paupers: but the Clerk having intimated that this extra allowance would not be allowed in the accounts, the resolution was rescinded and the poor people lost their Christmas dinner. We positively dread the working of the new poor law.¹⁰

The loss of the Christmas dinner is imagined here as a symbol for the inhumanity of the Commissioners and the new workhouse system as a whole.¹¹

However, not all workhouses complied with the new regulations; despite the explicit orders of the Poor Law Commissioners, some institutions continued to provide paupers with Christmas roast beef and plum pudding.¹² Tara Moore points out that, ‘by the 1840s, the culture’s sensitivity to Christmas benevolence had so softened the Guardians that they began providing just enough ritual food for a one-day feast’.¹³ Whereas the paupers in *Oliver Twist* receive an additional ‘two ounces [of gruel] and a quarter of bread’ on ‘occasions of great public rejoicing’, the inmates of the London workhouses could, in fact, expect somewhat more appetising fare.¹⁴ *The Times* reports that at the Greenwich Union in 1841, adults and children over twelve received ‘8oz of baked beef, 16oz of baked potatoes, 14oz of boiled plum pudding, and one pint of strong beer each’.¹⁵ The following year, however, *The Times* disclosed the conflict

10. ‘Domestic’, *Lancaster Gazette and General Advertiser, for Lancashire, Westmorland, &c*, 31 December 1836, p. 1.

11. An illustration published in the *Odd Fellow* depicts a commissioner extinguishing the paupers’ dream of Christmas food. ‘The Pauper’s Vision’, *Odd Fellow*, 9 January 1841, p. 5.

12. Durbach notes that, ‘many boards of guardians ignored these directives and did provide special treats to workhouse inmates without asking permission’. Durbach, ‘Roast Beef’, p. 972.

13. Tara Moore, ‘Starvation in Victorian Christmas Fiction’, *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 36.2 (September 2008), 489–505 (p. 498). See also Pimlott, *The Englishman’s Christmas*, p. 90.

14. Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*, ed. Kathleen Tillotson (Oxford and New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 11.

15. ‘Christmas-Day in the Workhouses’. *The Times* inaugurated an annual tradition of detailing the food given in each of the London workhouses on 25th December. Not all workhouses were forthcoming with the details of their

between the Greenwich guardians and their clerk. In a meeting of the board of guardians, the clerk had declared that ‘the new rules of the Poor Law Commissioners’ were so stringent as regarded the dietary of paupers, that they could only be altered by the medical officer’.¹⁶ Moreover, he argued, the ‘out-door poor [...] scarcely knew the taste of meat’ and were ‘more deserving than the better fed in the workhouse’.¹⁷ Unlike the Bath guardians, the Greenwich guardians were apparently loath to contravene the growing cultural spirit of Christmas. As the rules regarding the dietary did not explicitly mention Christmas, the Greenwich guardians ultimately concluded that this day must be an exception and the dinner went ahead as usual.

Eventually, it seems that pressure from guardians to recognize Christmas became such that the Poor Law Commissioners had no option but to enshrine the annual dinner in (poor) law. As Durbach argues, ‘at stake for local officials was their power to dispense relief as they saw fit within their own communities. They sought to preserve not only the rights of ratepayers to have their monies used for charitable ends, but also their own reputations as benevolent guardians of the poor’.¹⁸ In 1840, the Poor Law Commissioners permitted workhouses to allow Christmas meals paid for by subscriptions from charitable members of the public.¹⁹ Later, in 1847, *The General Orders of the Poor Law Commissioners* declared that, on this one day, workhouse

Christmas fare. Responding to a request for information from *The Times*, the response from the Bethnal Green workhouse was, ‘Don’t you wish you may get it? You have not got such information from other workhouses, and I should like to know what newspapers have to do with it at all’. ‘Christmas-Day in the Workhouses’, *The Times*, 25 December 1841, p. 6.

16. ‘Christmas-Day in the Workhouses’, *The Times*, 26 December 1842, p. 6.

17. ‘Christmas-Day in the Workhouses’, 1842. This argument against the workhouse Christmas reiterates the Poor Law Commissioners’ insistence that the workhouse must be less attractive than the lot of an independent labourer.

18. Durbach, ‘Roast Beef’, p. 983.

19. Durbach, ‘Roast Beef’, p. 979. Despite this amendment, many guardians maintained that the dinners should rightly be paid from the poor rates. For a discussion, see Durbach, ‘Roast Beef’, pp. 981–85.

dinners need not to adhere to the 'dietary table' and could, legitimately, be charged to the rates.²⁰

A footnote to this section points out that, 'the Commissioners have here removed the difficulty which has heretofore existed in regard to the extra allowances for the dinners on Christmas-day which many Boards of Guardians desired to give to pauper inmates of the workhouse'.²¹

Newspapers and magazines fuelled the growing perception of pauper festivities as public events, worthy of national dissemination. Moore suggests that, 'with the dawn of the revitalized Victorian Christmas [...] a social message of middle-class charity took precedence'.²² Within this cultural climate of benevolence, the provision of special meals in workhouses, funded by the rates, enabled each ratepayer to lay claim to a charitable identity; as Durbach points out, these meals 'allowed the more fortunate members of the nation to express their own sense of themselves as compassionate and thus model British subjects'.²³ Indeed, in addition to a workhouse dinner funded by the poor rates, from the mid-nineteenth century many paupers could also expect additional gifts or entertainment provided at the expense of benevolent middle-class individuals. Accordingly, as the century progressed, the workhouse Christmas gradually became the cultural domain of the middle classes.²⁴ As well as donating gifts of tea, snuff or fruit, bourgeois Victorians wrote to newspapers about their experiences of attending workhouse celebrations and peeping into the kitchens at the preparations for the Christmas meal. In fact, Moore points out that 'guardians encouraged a tourist approach to class-based goodwill by opening union doors for voyeurs seeking the spectacle of benevolence and

20. Durbach, 'Roast Beef', p. 985.

21. William Golden Lumley, *The General Orders of the Poor Law Commissioners* (London: Charles Knight, 1847), p. 174.

22. Moore, 'Starvation in Victorian Christmas Fiction', p. 489.

23. Durbach, 'Roast Beef', p. 988.

24. Longmate points out that 'Christmas by mid century was being celebrated at many workhouses as an Open Day on which leading local residents paid a formal visit to the paupers in their care'. Longmate, *The Workhouse*, p. 222.

gratitude'.²⁵ This idea of workhouse Christmas tourism seems apt. In 1880, the *Birmingham Daily Post* detailed the lavish celebrations and Christmas food enjoyed by the paupers at the local workhouse, but remarked that the workhouse had become so busy with visitors that not all could be admitted.²⁶ The news article relates that, '[h]itherto on Christmas morning the house was thrown open *pro bono publico*, but in consequence of the great influx of visitors on each occasion the Guardians this year limited the visitation to such persons as were accompanied by members of the Board or those having letters of introduction'.²⁷ The result was that 'large numbers of person[s] who crowded the front of the gates hoping to get admission as usual had to be refused an entrance'.²⁸ The crowds of people hoping to bear witness to the workhouse Christmas spectacular can be likened to theatre goers; the Birmingham workhouse Christmas is an exclusive stage accessible only with a ticket of admission.

As demonstrated in the *Birmingham Daily Post*, ideas of charity, tourism and spectacle converge in accounts of the workhouse Christmas. This article analyses how such representations reconstruct the institution as a stage for the projection of the middle-class philanthropic self. Moore argues that '[t]he press has long since been a site of identity formation, and Christmas print matter cultivated a particular in-group'.²⁹ This idea of 'identity formation' is, I suggest, particularly relevant to representations of workhouse philanthropy; as much as they promote an altruistic message, these texts simultaneously reconstruct the institution as a signifier of middle-class identity and position a reader as part of this charitable 'in group'. In exploring the workhouse Christmas as a stage for the bourgeois self, I also draw attention to the ideas of

25. Moore, *Victorian Christmas*, p. 72.

26. Armstrong discusses the history of workhouse Christmas charity and draws attention to the Birmingham workhouse as an example of a 'civic spectacle'. Armstrong, *Christmas in Nineteenth-Century England*, p. 111.

27. 'Christmas in Birmingham', *Birmingham Daily Post*, 27 December 1880, p. 5.

28. 'Christmas in Birmingham', p.5.

29. Moore, *Victorian Christmas*, p. 1.

hierarchy, power and control that are implicit in these representations of private charity so publicly given.³⁰ As Marcel Mauss points out, '[t]o give is to show one's superiority, to show that one is something more and higher, that one is magister. To accept without returning or repaying more is to face subordination, to become a client and subservient, to become minister'.³¹ I examine, therefore, the ideologies of discipline and social order that are implicit in these depictions of workhouse benevolence; while they foreground the sympathetic self, such texts simultaneously work to reinforce the social gulf between charitable givers and subservient paupers who, by dint of their pauperism, will never return or repay.

II. Exhibiting Charity

The workhouse Christmas dinner is the subject of a chapter and illustration (Figure 1) in the series 'Notes of a Union Chaplain' (1859), published in *Sunday at Home*. In this instalment, the chaplain narrates his experience of visiting a workhouse on Christmas day. Despite the institutional setting, middle-class ideologies of home and family overlay the representation of the pauper space. The opening of the text places emphasis on Christmas as a time for strengthening familial bonds. Accordingly, the scene portrayed in both text and image is comfortingly domestic, more reminiscent of a cosy, crowded home than an institution for the poor. The workhouse dining hall is described as being in its 'Christmas clothing'.³² Indeed, there is a sense of the theatrical about the illustration; the viewer looks onto the scene as if looking onto a stage. In the forefront of the image (downstage) is the trestle table, laden with food, around which

30. In a discussion of the upper-class household, Armstrong points out that, 'gift rituals could often reinforce the strict hierarchy of the household structure'. Armstrong, *Christmas in Nineteenth-Century England*, p. 83.

31. Marcel Mauss quoted in Howard Newby, 'The Deferential Dialectic', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 17.2 (April 1975), 139–64 (p. 161).

32. 'Notes of a Union Chaplain. Chapter X. Christmas Day in the Workhouse', *Sunday at Home*, 22 December 1859, pp. 801–804 (p. 803).

men, women and children happily crowd. At the back of the scene (upstage) is the respectable-looking figure of the master, who is performing the paternal act of carving up the meat. To his right, a figure stands posed with an immense platter of food. The scenery of 'evergreens', 'large boughs of holly with its glittering berries' and 'banners of various colours', hangs above the heads of the figures.³³ The chaplain, the narrator of the text, plays a prominent role in the image; he poses with his right hand outstretched towards the dining table, as if self-consciously indicating the scene to an audience.

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Figure 1. *Christmas Dinner in the Workhouse*, in 'Notes of a Union Chaplain. Chapter X. Christmas Day in the Workhouse', *Sunday at Home*, 22 December 1859, p. 801. © The British Library Board (X29/4786, p. 801)

The workhouse, unfamiliar territory to a middle-class reader, is transformed by Christmas iconography into a recognisable space that links together, and promotes, the bourgeois values of family, home, and Christian charity. The reader of *Sunday at Home*, whose rates have funded the workhouse Christmas dinner, can implicitly participate in this scene of goodwill.³⁴ Though not pictured in the image, the middle classes have a spectral presence: a philanthropic individual has gifted fruit and decorations, and there are 'several visitors' present at

33. 'Christmas Day in the Workhouse', p. 803.

34. On the subject of the workhouse Christmas dinner, the chaplain-narrator remarks, '[where] is the uncharitable rate-payer who will grudge a fraction more in his poor-rate to provide the poor in his parish workhouse with a substantial Christmas dinner?' 'Christmas Day in the Workhouse', pp. 801–802. Durbach points out that rate-funded Christmas dinners enabled 'communities to participate in these customs of benevolence'. Durbach, 'Roast Beef', p. 983.

the workhouse who are ‘expressing their pleasure at the scene’.³⁵ Indeed, this workhouse spectacle is invested with value; as the Chaplain notes in the written text, ‘it is a Christmas sight worth seeing’.³⁶ I suggest that, for a reader, the real ‘worth’ of this scene lies, not in its novelty or the reassurance that the poor are well fed, but in the ‘identity-building’ nature of the representation: a viewer is meant to identify with the middle-class ideologies signified in the image.³⁷

The focus on the workhouse in Christmas publishing reminded readers of their own Christian duty towards the less fortunate. From the mid-century, appeals to readers to donate gifts to ‘deserving’ inmates became commonplace in magazines; frequently, such appeals were directly addressed to women and children.³⁸ This message of benevolence was the subject of a poem and illustration in the 1869 Christmas issue of the *Children’s Friend*. In the poem ‘Christmas Week: a Contrast and a Seasonable Hint’, the middle-class Christmas is contrasted with the bleaker imagery of a child in a workhouse sick ward. The opening verses construct an image of a pleasant domestic interior, snug and secured against the bitter winter weather outside:

Now draw the curtains close,
And guard from cold and gloom
From wind that blows, and falling snows,
The comfortable room.³⁹

Repeatedly, the poem invokes images of enclosed interiors: phrases such as ‘now the curtains close’, ‘dear home circles’, and ‘curtained room and door’ suggest the safety and wholesomeness

35. ‘Christmas Day in the Workhouse’, p. 803.

36. ‘Christmas Day in the Workhouse’, p. 803.

37. Moore uses the term ‘identity-building’ in her discussion of the Christmas narrative in *Victorian Christmas*.

38. Armstrong notes that nineteenth-century charity ‘encouraged the middle-class child to become a donor’. Armstrong, *Christmas in Nineteenth-Century England*, p. 107.

39. ‘Christmas Week’, *Children’s Friend*, 1 December 1869, p. 183, ll. 1–4.

implicit in the domestic home.⁴⁰ At the same time, there is, perhaps, a veiled comment on consumerism within the home; the middle-class children described in the poem have ‘forgotten store[s]’ and ‘overflowing hoard[s]’ of treasures, as well as the latest ‘pleasant book’ and ‘newest toy’.⁴¹ By contrast, the sick and parentless workhouse child, ‘tied to her cot’, has ‘[n]o pictured page and toys [to] engage/ [h]er slowly dragging hours’.⁴² The poem urges young readers to ‘throw light upon the night/ which darkens that sick ward’ by donating their neglected toys to poor children.⁴³ As Neil Armstrong notes, representations of ‘acts of selflessness contributed to the ideal picture of middle-class childhood at Christmas, tempering concerns about material desire’.⁴⁴ In performing charity, the children will also implicitly ease middle-class anxieties about consumerism.

Middle-class visitors take centre stage in the festive scene of workhouse charity pictured on the next page of the magazine. *Sending Toys to the Workhouse and Hospital Children* (Figure 2) stages the charitable actions propagated by the poem. It depicts six well-to-do children searching their toy cupboards for old playthings and, subsequently, delivering those toys to the door of the workhouse. The picture is heavily ideological, juxtaposing the home and the institution, the private and the public spheres, the affluent and the (invisible) poor in an idealized scene of charitable giving, encompassed within a decorative framework of holly. Though the middle-class interior shares the page with the workhouse exterior, the former dominates the page. Within the safe environs of the comfortable room, a smiling mother and her young children enact a charitable bourgeois identity in a set reminiscent of a *tableau vivant*. The action of giving is the clear focus of this illustration; centralized in the image is a doll that a little girl passes down to a

40. ‘Christmas Week’, p. 183, ll. 1, 22, 74.

41. ‘Christmas Week’, p. 183, ll. 50, 58, 14, 15.

42. ‘Christmas Week’, p. 183, ll. 27, 35–36.

43. ‘Christmas Week’, p. 183, ll. 77–78.

44. Armstrong, *Christmas in Nineteenth-Century England*, p. 107.

younger sister while another, smaller child, puts a plaything into the outstretched hand of her mother. The spherical shape of the image invokes the safety and security of the 'dear home circles' imagined in the poem. Moreover, this spherical image, with its border of holly, resembles an ornate mirror; viewers looking onto the scene are encouraged to self-identify with the charitable middle-class ideologies represented.

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

Figure 2. *Sending Toys to the Workhouse and Hospital Children*, in *Children's Friend*, 1 December, 1869, p. 184. © The British Library Board (P.P.1163.00, p. 184)

The smaller illustration of the workhouse exterior, identifiable as such by the bleak institutional sign, 'NOTICE UNION', appears below the depiction of the home. Despite the connotations of poverty attached to the building, this vignette is a cheerful one: the porter at the workhouse door welcomes the children with a smile. Significantly, the sick and orphaned children, the recipients of this charity, are absent from the scene, hidden from sight by the workhouse walls. The decision not to picture these destitute children privileges the middle-class act of giving over the unseen objects of sympathy. The positioning of the home above the workhouse emphasizes the ascendancy of the domestic home over the institution and reinforces the sense of the family reaching down to the poor at the bottom of the social strata. Simultaneously, the arrangement constructs the workhouse as a supporting structure for the bourgeois sphere. While this arrangement reflects a rigid class hierarchy, it equally suggests the reliance of the middle classes upon the poor for their self-definition. In the image, the bourgeois home is interpreted in terms of its oppositional relationship to the workhouse: the institution literally provides a platform for the enactment of a bourgeois charitable identity.

Armstrong notes that, '[f]rom the 1850s Christmas treats to the inmates of workhouses

began to become more elaborate, and became the main focus of press reports on the civic celebration of Christmas'.⁴⁵ In January 1864, the *Illustrated London News* reported on one such lavish Christmas treat at the Greenwich union workhouse. A charitable woman, Mrs Angerstein, had donated 'eight magnificent Christmas trees' adorned with 'ornaments and useful articles' and thus created 'a scene never before witnessed within the walls of the Union-house'.⁴⁶ During the course of the evening, the paupers listened to speeches by an admiral and three reverends, received gifts from the tree, and watched a performance of the band of the Rifle Volunteer Corps. At the end of the occasion, Mrs Angerstein was rewarded with 'three hearty cheers'.⁴⁷ However, this conspicuous show of giving was, perhaps, not entirely altruistic. Norman McCord suggests that, '[i]n some cases ostentatious charitable activity might be a means to social distinction, or to a form of social rivalry between members of the propertied classes. Involvement in ameliorative activities could be derived from more subtle motives, such as a desire to buy off potential unrest and disaffection'.⁴⁸ Significantly, Mrs Angerstein is identified in the text as the wife of the Member of Parliament for Greenwich (William Angerstein).⁴⁹ As a recognisable figure in the community, whose social status is inextricable from her husband's electoral position, which in turn is dependent upon public feeling, Mrs Angerstein's extravagant display of charity implicitly gains political associations: it was conceivably a means to add to her husband's popularity in the community.

Peter Sinnema argues that, '[t]he *ILN* [*Illustrated London News*] makes the world,

45. Armstrong, *Christmas in Nineteenth-Century England*, p. 110.

46. 'Christmas Entertainment at the Greenwich Union', *Illustrated London News*, 16 January 1864, 65–66 (p. 66).

47. 'Christmas Entertainment at the Greenwich Union'.

48. Norman McCord, 'The Poor Law and Philanthropy', in *The New Poor Law in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. by Derek Fraser (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1976), pp. 87–110 (pp. 105–106).

49. As Armstrong notes, '[t]hough the expansion of Christmas charity was part of the development of a national culture, it also reinforced a local civic identity'. Armstrong, *Christmas in Nineteenth-Century England*, p. 105.

fabricating an English identity for its nineteenth-century readers, by contributing to such solidifying ideologies as those of national superiority, limitless technological progress, and bourgeois solidarity'.⁵⁰ These middle-class ideologies are latent in the wood engraving depicting this workhouse Christmas extravaganza (Figure 3). As in *Sending Toys*, the true interest of this workhouse scene is not the paupers, but the bourgeois visitors; the viewer of this Christmas splendour is affiliated with the pictorial visitors and is positioned as if standing amongst them, interpreting the workhouse through their eyes. While the paupers appear in the left margin of the scene, the more detailed figures of the middle-class visitors are privileged. A well-dressed woman, presumably the benefactress Mrs Angerstein, is pictured in the middle of the image, and is as much on display as the Christmas trees she has donated.

INSERT FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE

Figure 3. *Christmas Entertainment to the Inmates of the Greenwich Union-House*, in *Illustrated London News*, 16 January 1864, p. 65. Special Collections and Archives, Cardiff University

The lavishly decorated Christmas trees, icons of charitable middle-class giving, also function to suggest the 'Englishness' of the workhouse space.⁵¹ Visible on the branches are the flags of St George and the United Kingdom, and the royal standard of England is draped upon the wall behind. These inscriptions of nationality on the workhouse imply the greatness of this charitable country that affords such care to its poor. The pictorial flags also forge a visual link with the illustration of the Cape Town railway that shares the page with the workhouse scene. A

50. Peter W. Sinnema, *Dynamics of the Pictured Page: Representing the Nation in the Illustrated London News* (Aldershot; Brookfield, VT: Ashgate, 1998), p. 31.

51. Moore points out that an illustration of the Christmas tree in the 1848 *ILN* Christmas supplement 'helped codify the tradition [of the Christmas tree] into English Custom'. Moore, *Victorian Christmas*, p. 1.

flag of the United Kingdom is prominent in this celebration of progress, colonisation, Englishness and power. In this instance, the juxtaposition of two apparently unrelated images implicitly invites viewers to read the workhouse in light of these ideas, interpreting it as a display of social power and colonisation of space by the middle classes.⁵²

In January 1865, the *ILN* devoted a wood engraving and short textual report to workhouse festivities in the City of London Union Workhouse. The text describes the transformation of the institutional workhouse space with decorations of evergreens, floral wreaths, hanging baskets and landscape pictures. The pleasant Christmas-scape projected by the *ILN* is unsettled, however, by the context in which this article appeared. A month earlier, Timothy Daly, a twenty-eight-year-old pauper, died from bedsores resulting from poor medical care in the Holborn Union Infirmary.⁵³ The inquest into his death was widely reported during that festive season and the Christmas backdrop no doubt accentuated the pathos of the descriptions of workhouse misery.⁵⁴ The Daly case contributed to a climate of increasing disquiet

52. In his analysis of the *ILN*, Sinnema explores how ‘forms such as the poem or the engraved picture are invariably redefined according to the way they are embedded in, or received as constituent parts of, the newspaper’. Sinnema, *Dynamics of the Pictured Page*, p. 34.

53. In the sensationally-titled article ‘The Alleged Horrible Death from Union Treatment’, the *Birmingham Daily Post* provides details of the coroner’s inquest into the case, describing the dreadful condition of Daly’s bedsores. The article reports the jury’s conclusion that ‘the deceased died from bed-sores and rheumatic fever; and we find that whilst he was in the infirmary of the Holborn Union he did not receive sufficient care and attention from the medical officer’. ‘The Alleged Horrible Death from Union Treatment’, *Birmingham Daily Post*, 29 December 1864, p. 7.

54. In a report in the *Bury and Norwich Post, and Suffolk Herald*, the case of Daly and another impoverished woman are described as ‘especially shocking on account of their occurrence at a period when good cheer was being poured into the metropolis in the utmost abundance’. ‘Sad Stories for Christmas-Tide’, *Bury and Norwich Post, and Suffolk Herald*, 3 January 1865, p. 3.

about the treatment of the sick poor.⁵⁵ On the same day on which the *ILN* Christmas scene appeared, the *Saturday Review* published a scathing criticism of the workhouse guardians ‘to whose niggardly dietary and scanty medical salary the death of Daly was really due’.⁵⁶ The article insists that Daly’s death was not an isolated incident of neglect, but symptomatic of systematic poor treatment across metropolitan workhouse infirmaries. The multiple narratives that circulated about the Daly case provided readers with a conflicting representation of a metropolitan workhouse to that shaped by the *ILN*.

Far from criticising the workhouse authorities, the *ILN* reaffirms a conservative view of the guardians as the generous benefactors of the poor, noting that the guardians of the City of London Union ‘at their own private expense, give an annual entertainment at this season of the year to the inmates of the workhouse’.⁵⁷ A song composed and performed especially for the evening foregrounds this benevolent representation of these authority figures. One of the two verses printed in the newspaper reads:

There may be some who care as much, but none more, I am sure,
Than the guardians of this Union for the comfort of their poor.
If testimony were required, how soon would every one come
To praise the kind attention for the sick by Dr Buncombe.⁵⁸

55. In 1865, *The Lancet* announced its appointment of a Sanitary Commission to enquire into the state of workhouse infirmaries. The reports that followed revealed the full extent of the mismanagement that existed within workhouses and prompted the passing of the Metropolitan Poor Act in 1867. For more information on workhouse medicine, see Kim Price, *Medical Negligence in Victorian Britain: The Crisis of Care under the English Poor Law, C. 1834-1900* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015) or Crowther’s chapter on ‘The Medical Staff and the Infirmaries’ in *The Workhouse System*, pp. 156–90.

56. ‘Timothy Daly’, *Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art*, 21 January 1865, pp. 70–71 (p. 71).

57. ‘Christmas Entertainment to the Poor of the City of London Union’, *Illustrated London News*, 21 January 1865, pp. 51–52 (p. 51).

58. ‘Christmas Entertainment’, p. 51. In 1880, Dr Buncombe was charged with manslaughter after a patient was

The guardians of the City of London Union are constructed in terms of their paternal care towards ‘their poor’. In light of the contemporary scrutiny of the medical officer implicated in the Daly case, the legalistic term ‘testimony’, in reference to Dr Buncombe’s ‘kind attention for the sick’, seems particularly pertinent. At a moment when metropolitan workhouse guardians and medical officers were in the public eye, the *ILN* presents the middle-class reader with a reassuring impression of comfort and care.

Significantly, a reader of the *ILN* is ideologically aligned with these charitable figures. The article details the decorative banners that proclaim thanks for the chairman, and individually names the members of the workhouse committee and the workhouse master and matron. In contrast, the paupers, for whom the festivities are ostensibly provided, are almost absent from the textual report; mention of the paupers is limited to a single sentence, informing readers that ‘the poor people retired to their dormitories, though not before they had given three hearty cheers’ in thanks to their benefactors.⁵⁹ The only individual mention of a pauper is to note that the landscape pictures decorating the walls are the work of an inmate named Ashby. At the same time as acknowledging his talent, the text implicitly censures him: this ‘artistic skill might have preserved [...the inmate...], one would have thought, from pauperism’.⁶⁰ There is covert judgement here of a man who has failed to use his talent to support himself independently and who has, instead, fallen upon the workhouse. This value-laden comment subliminally forges a link between text and reader; the text assumes a readership with a shared social outlook on poverty, and positions the reader as socially above the poor, able to pass comment upon the

murdered by a ‘lunatic pauper’. The coroner’s jury considered that Buncombe had not ‘shown proper care and attention in getting this person [the murderer] out of the workhouse’. The case was thrown out when it went before the grand jury. See ‘Poor-Law Medical Officers’ Association’, *British Medical Journal*, 27 August 1881, pp. 373–376 (p. 373).

59. ‘Christmas Entertainment’, p. 51.

60. ‘Christmas Entertainment’, p. 51.

lower classes.

Like the text, the accompanying image marginalizes the paupers. The richly apparelled visitors, the audience to the pauper festivities, appear in the foreground of the illustration and are themselves scrutinized by the audience of the *ILN*. The proximity of the middle-class visitors aligns the readership with these figures; the positioning of the viewer so that he or she shares the same perspective as the pictured guests points to the more covert locating of the reader in terms of ideological outlook. Theatricality lies at the heart of this accompanying image (Figure 4). Centralized in the illustration is the ‘stage with a painted scene’ upon which the entertainment takes place.⁶¹ This ‘painted scene’ represents a bourgeois lounge or drawing room and, ironically, positions middle-class domesticity at the centre of the institutional interior. It seems that the workhouse has become, quite literally, the platform for the enactment of bourgeois ideologies. Moreover, the proscenium arch of the stage is replicated in the framing of the illustration. This shaping of the image draws attention to the workhouse as a stage and to the visitors and guardians as players in this scene of middle-class charity. The privileging of the charitable middle classes in text and image suggests that the occasion is, in fact, more of a public celebration in honour of these figures than for the entertainment of the poor. The real audience of the guardians’ value-laden performance is the readership of the *ILN*.

INSERT FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE

Figure 4. *Christmas Entertainment to the Poor of the City of London Union, Illustrated London News*, 21 January 1865, p. 52. Special Collections and Archives, Cardiff University

III. Discipline and Disorder: Role Play

61. ‘Christmas Entertainment’, p. 51.

In the *ILN* images, workhouse discipline is not suspended in honour of Christmas: uniformed paupers are segregated by gender and seated in orderly rows. The disciplinary nature of charitable performance comes to the fore in the article ‘A Christmas Tree at a Workhouse’ (1881), published in the *Monthly Packet*. This article acts as a guide for ‘those who desire to undertake the preparing of a Christmas tree’.⁶² The authorial voice is that of a bourgeois woman, who, in her narrative, draws upon her own experience to advise readers on the matters of which gifts to buy and where to buy them from, how to attach them to the tree, and other useful tips.

Though the article does not designate much space to the inmates’ reactions, it is made clear that the gifts bring much joy. The handkerchiefs given to the babies ‘[delight]’ the mothers; the girls are so excited by receiving a doll that, at night, they ‘can hardly close their own eyes for happiness’; and the old ‘childish’ women who also receive dolls ‘walk off, hugging and admiring their treasures’.⁶³ The performance of gift giving is extended to include the workhouse staff and the middle-class women who have helped facilitate this Christmas treat. The writer points out that, ‘I always have presents for the officials, and for the ladies who help me in the distribution; it seems to make us all one in the enjoyment of the treat (at least in idea), and prevents unpleasant distinctions’.⁶⁴ Although the visitor gives gifts to create a sense of ‘oneness’, the word ‘seems’ simultaneously draws attention to the illusory nature of this social cohesion. Furthermore, the idea that the giving of presents masks any ‘unpleasant distinctions’ unsettles the text’s construction of the ‘delighted’ pauper recipient. There is, perhaps, an implicit acknowledgement here of the paupers’ awareness that, in accepting a gift, they are also accepting the position of ‘subordinate’ pauper.

Ostensibly, gifts are fairly distributed amongst the inmates, and each receives the same as

62. ‘A Christmas Tree at a Workhouse’, *Monthly Packet*, 1 December 1881, pp. 609–612 (p. 611).

63. ‘A Christmas Tree’, p. 610.

64. ‘A Christmas Tree’, p. 611.

every other person of their class. However, gifts still act as rewards for those who have exhibited good behaviour: some of the dolls are ‘so beautiful that they have to be kept for the best girls’.⁶⁵ Moreover, gifts are clearly distributed in order of moral worth. The first paupers to parade past the visitor and receive a present are the school children. Last in line are those paupers belonging to the ‘most unsatisfactory class of all, the women with babies’.⁶⁶ These women, associated as they are with sexual incontinence, are implicitly shamed again by their position at the end of the queue.⁶⁷ The disciplinary subtext of this Christmas charity is most evident in the final lines of the narrative; here, the narrator describes how ‘a young woman came from the Workhouse and begged to speak to me’.⁶⁸ This woman was desperate to ‘regain her character’ and, when asked as to why she had approached the narrator, explained that, ‘when I took so much trouble about the Christmas Tree, I should never mind the trouble in helping her’.⁶⁹ In response to this appeal, the narrator recounts that she sent the young woman to a penitentiary where she learnt the skills to be a ‘useful servant’ and, thus, to be of use to her social superiors.⁷⁰ The final sentence asserts that, ‘she is not the first or only one who has learned a good lesson, and has been the real fruit of my Christmas Tree’.⁷¹ It seems that the ‘real fruit’ of charity is the cultivation of a well-disciplined member of the working class.

The covert disciplinary effect of workhouse charity is particularly evident in the illustrated narrative ‘A Workhouse Episode’, published just over ten years later in *Quiver*

65. ‘A Christmas Tree’, p. 609.

66. ‘A Christmas Tree’, p. 609.

67. Crowther points out that charity often ‘tended to make even more arbitrary distinctions between the deserving and the undeserving poor than did the guardians’. Crowther, *The Workhouse System*, p. 71.

68. ‘A Christmas Tree’, p. 612.

69. ‘A Christmas Tree’, p. 612.

70. ‘A Christmas Tree’, p. 612.

71. ‘A Christmas Tree’, p. 612.

magazine in January 1892. Literal fruit is at the heart of this narrative, which details a philanthropic visitor's provision of a 'huge strawberry feast' to delighted workhouse paupers.⁷² The visitor, known in the text by the pseudonym of the 'Workhouse Friend', is given visual expression in an illustration (Figure 5); in the scene, she is depicted parading through a workhouse ward with a platter piled high with strawberries, while bedridden paupers hold out their arms towards her in excitement. The pauper recipients of this surprising treat are infantilized in the text: the aged women are 'like children in their glee'; the men, demonstrating the unrestrained appetite of childhood, are 'greedy' and '[grasp] at the plate before their proper turn had arrived'; and a bedridden man 'laughs like a happy child' when he is fed by the visitor.⁷³ The narrative both indulges and emphasizes this 'childlike' behaviour; one of the men, 'alarmed lest anyone should wish to share his portion', pours both sugar and strawberries into his handkerchief and 'stole away out of the room to consume it in secret'.⁷⁴ A vignette at the opening of the narrative depicts this man furtively eating his strawberries (Figure 6). In its infantilising of the paupers, the text both compounds their dependent status and reinforces the construction of the gracious visitor. Of course, for the modern reader, the inmates' reactions to the strawberries reveal a more disturbing subtext: a restricted and monotonous workhouse diet lies behind the display of greed and glee.⁷⁵

INSERT FIGURES 5 AND 6 ABOUT HERE

72. 'A Workhouse Episode', *Quiver*, January 1892, pp. 372–75 (p. 372).

73. 'A Workhouse Episode', p. 373.

74. 'A Workhouse Episode', p. 373.

75. Moore draws attention to the connection between appetite and hardship, noting that, in Braddon's *The Christmas Hirelings*, 'Laddie's ostensible greediness is most likely the result of his family's poverty'. Moore, 'Starvation in Victorian Christmas Fiction', p. 500.

Figure 5. *Who raised their grey heads from the pillows with exclamations of delight*, in ‘A Workhouse Episode’, *Quiver*, January 1892, p. 373. © The British Library Board (P.P.268.cb, p. 373)

Figure 6. *He stole away out of the room to consume it*, in ‘A Workhouse Episode’, *Quiver*, January 1892, p. 372. © The British Library Board (P.P.268.cb, p. 372)

The real ‘episode’ of the narrative, however, is not the strawberry feast, but the rupturing of this charitable performance in one pauper’s refusal to consume the proffered charity. This moment of rejection is privileged in the narrative by its depiction in an illustration (Figure 7). Although he has helped to distribute the fruit, this man ‘damp[s] the pleasure’ of the ‘Friend’ by resisting all entreaties to himself partake of the treat.⁷⁶ Cultural anxieties about the rejection of charity are implicit in the reaction of the visitor; she construes this as a personal affront and, ‘distressed’, makes ‘anxious inquiries’ into the pauper’s history.⁷⁷ It is revealed that, since entering the workhouse many years ago, this man has refused all private charity:

On Christmas Day they always had a great dinner of roast beef and plum-pudding instead of their ordinary fare; but Bell, the recalcitrant inmate in question, absolutely declined to partake of it – he would have his regular rations, but nothing more.

Sometimes a concert, preceded by an entertainment of tea and cake, was organised by kind persons, which gave great pleasure to the rest of the household, but nothing could induce Bell to be present – he remained alone in his empty ward and there drank his gruel[.]⁷⁸

The text criminalizes Bell, terming him a ‘recalcitrant inmate’ for his rejection of middle-class

76. ‘A Workhouse Episode’, p. 374.

77. ‘A Workhouse Episode’, p. 374.

78. ‘A Workhouse Episode’, p. 374.

charity.⁷⁹ Durbach suggests that the roast beef dinner functioned to '[unite] society across divisions of class and [...] promoted national feeling among the lower orders, those most likely to cause social upheaval'.⁸⁰ If so, then Bell's refusal to partake in the feast seems particularly subversive. It places him outside a national culture and marks him as a potential threat to social cohesion. Significantly, this pauper is rendered more threatening by his association with the foreign: he has a 'dark, intelligent face, bronzed evidently by tropical suns'.⁸¹ Together with his time abroad, his rejection of British culture, symbolized by the Christmas dinner and the strawberries, marks him as other to society.

INSERT FIGURE 7 ABOUT HERE

Figure 7. *I don't want it, and I won't have it*, in 'A Workhouse Episode', *Quiver*, January 1892, p. 375.

© The British Library Board (P.P.268.cb, p. 375)

When the visitor demands an explanation from the pauper, he reveals that he does not wish to be 'beholden to [...others...]' for so much as the value of a single strawberry' and asserts that 'pride was left to him'.⁸² This refusal to be 'beholden' represents an implicit threat; if workhouse charity functioned to underline class superiority by making paupers 'beholden' to their social betters, then this pauper's refusal of charity suggests a refusal of the class hierarchy itself. The visitor is thus at pains to induce Bell to retract his staunch views on accepting charity. In the final lines of the narrative, the temporary disruption of the relationship between giver and receiver is restored. The pauper, persuaded to relinquish his 'pride' along with his objection to

79. 'A Workhouse Episode', p. 374.

80. Durbach, 'Roast Beef', p. 987.

81. 'A Workhouse Episode', p. 374.

82. 'A Workhouse Episode', p. 375.

accepting charity, concedes with an ‘almost childlike smile’ that, in future, he would ‘very thankfully receive any strawberries’.⁸³ Like the other paupers, he becomes infantilized when he accepts the visitor’s charity and, consequently, his social position as indebted and deferential is confirmed. The narrative closes on the note that ‘if he lives to the next twenty-fifth December, the Christmas dinner in the workhouse will have another grateful guest’.⁸⁴ The concluding image of the ‘grateful guest’ signifies the ends to which this charitable mission has worked: the disciplining of a ‘recalcitrant’ man into the thankful British pauper, a ‘guest’ at the meal hosted by ratepayers.

The disruption of the charitable narrative and, implicitly, of the social status quo, is resolved within the narrative of ‘A Workhouse Episode’. By contrast, Hubert Von Herkomer’s *Christmas in a Workhouse* (Figure 8), published sixteen years earlier in *Graphic* magazine in 1876, offers a more unsettling narrative of charity that has no comforting resolution. The wood engraving depicts a gloomy workhouse hall, in which a charitable, fur-clad visitor distributes a Christmas gift of tea to elderly pauper women. Though garlands drape the windows and banners on the walls read ‘Merry Christmas’ and ‘God Bless our Master and Matron’, this seasonal scenery does not offset the bleakness of the workhouse interior. Lee MacCormick Edwards points out the ambivalent nature of these signs, suggesting that they are either ‘intended by the artist to be read ironically or, conversely, to emphasize the notion of charity and “good works” so soothing to those Victorians largely isolated from the ghetto-like horror of London’s slums’.⁸⁵ Although the scene pays lip service to the celebration of middle-class charity, the pervasive air of melancholy disrupts the dominant narrative of ‘good works’.

83. ‘A Workhouse Episode’, p. 375.

84. ‘A Workhouse Episode’, p. 375.

85. Lee MacCormick Edwards, *Herkomer: A Victorian Artist* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), p. 76.

INSERT FIGURE 8 ABOUT HERE

Figure 8. Hubert Von Herkomer, *Christmas in a Workhouse*, *Graphic Christmas Number*, 25 December 1876, p. 30. Special Collections and Archives, Cardiff University

In the foreground of the image, a hunched woman is helped by a younger assistant to receive her present. Together, visitor and paupers form a tableau of giving and receiving that implicitly draws attention to the staged nature of charity; the younger woman supports the elderly pauper in a deferential begging posture, palm held upwards towards the visitor. In contrast to previous texts, the affluent visitor is not the focus of the scene; she sits in the corner of the image, her face shaded and in profile to the viewer. The image instead privileges the elderly pauper woman and her assistant. These two pauper women loom large in the scene; their faces, illuminated in the image, are clearly visible to a viewer. It is this individualising of the pauper, which, I suggest, both elicits the viewer's sympathy and renders the image so unsettling. Significantly, Audrey Jaffe argues that '[t]he "objects" of Victorian sympathy are inseparable from Victorian middle-class self-representation precisely because they embody, to a middle-class spectator, his or her own potential of social decline'.⁸⁶ If so, this pauper figure may have spoken to a viewer's subliminal anxieties about a possible descent into social abjection. By placing the pauper centre stage, Herkomer's image asks the viewer to contemplate the very pauperism whitewashed in other images of workhouse charity.

The middle-class 'fear of falling', as Jaffe terms it, is latent in the poem that appears below the image.⁸⁷ It opens:

86. Audrey Jaffe, *Scenes of Sympathy: Identity and Representation in Victorian Fiction* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2000), p. 9.

87. Jaffe, *Scenes of Sympathy*, p. 19.

Once on a time, not long ago,
Only some sixty years or so,
Her skin was white as driven snow,
Each lip a cherry;⁸⁸

The opening phrase ‘Once on a time’ is evocative of the fairy tale; likewise, the description of skin ‘white as driven snow’ is reminiscent of the Brother’s Grimm tale ‘Snow White’. If the first stanza draws upon fairy tale, however, then the second stanza is grounded in the grim reality of a Victorian reader:

But when Old Age, bereaved, distressed,
Crawls to the Workhouse for its rest,
Existence then must be at best
A desolation.⁸⁹

The poem’s construction of abject and humiliated ‘Old Age’, forced to ‘crawl’ to the union, unsettles the narrative of care foregrounded in representations of charity. Like the image, the poem signals the frightening potential to sink down the social scale in old age and reminds a reader of the fragility of economic independence. As well as an economic ‘fall’ from self-sufficiency to the workhouse, it simultaneously narrates a universal, inescapable fall: from youth and beauty to decrepit old age.

The final lines of the poem juxtapose this desolate ‘existence’ with a description of the workhouse at Christmas:

Most days are sad, but not quite all,
For even the cheerless Workhouse hall,
When dawns the Christmas festival,

88. Anon, ‘Christmas in a Workhouse’, *Graphic Christmas Number*, 25 December 1876, p. 30, ll. 1–4.

89. Anon, ‘Christmas in a Workhouse’, p. 30, ll. 13–16.

Looks bright and pleasant;
And then the kindly fairy's last
Best gift – the tea – in teapot cast,
May bring to mind a far-off Past,
A welcome Present!⁹⁰

In these final lines, the strains of the workhouse Christmas become clear. The ‘bright and pleasant’ appearance of the institution on Christmas day cannot offset the sadness of ‘most days’. The workhouse Christmas is, this text subtly suggests, a consoling façade that alleviates the guilt of the public about the treatment of the poor. This sense of performance is heightened by the casting of the visitor as ‘kindly fairy’, a description invoking the ‘good fairy’ of popular Victorian pantomime. Analysed in the light of the poem, the pictorial gift of tea passed from visitor to pauper gains new meanings. Reading the tea leaves will provide, not a glimpse of the future, but an escape into memory; trapped within the miserable confines of this workhouse Christmas, the gift offers the pauper a chance to return to a happier past.

Herkomer’s image, and the accompanying poem, problematize the ideology of the workhouse Christmas and, by extension, charitable giving. The ‘desolation’ of workhouse life lurks beneath the festive trappings. In comparison to the extravagant middle-class consumerism pictured on the surrounding pages, the gift of tea seems paltry.⁹¹ The subversion of Christmas charity is most prominent, however, in the pages of satirical periodicals. Moore argues that ‘[t]exts that explored the performance of the workhouse Christmas argued that, for the poor, the day did not signify the epitome of English charity; rather it was only a once-a-year performance

90. Anon, ‘Christmas in a Workhouse’, p. 30, ll. 17–24.

91. *Christmas in a Workhouse* was published opposite an image entitled *Returning Home with the Spoils* (p. 31). The picture depicts affluent little girls asleep within a carriage, surrounded by toys purchased on a Christmas shopping trip.

that underscored their status as social outcasts for the rest of the year'.⁹² In particular, 'Some Stereoscopic Views of Christmas' (1882), published in *Funny Folks*, offers a cynical interpretation of charity as a self-conscious display of middle-class power. The article purports to provide a view of a workhouse Christmas from the perspective of a newspaper and a pauper inmate. The text is heavily ironic; the report is subtitled a 'Romance', a detail that draws attention to, and subverts, the rose-tinted representation of the workhouse in seasonal publishing. The newspaper, titled the *Bumbleboro' Gazette*, invokes the parsimony of Dickens's Mr Bumble in *Oliver Twist*. This 'newspaper' lauds the 'seasonal generosity' of the Mayor and other 'worthy' town residents who have treated the paupers to either an ounce of snuff or tea so 'superior' that 'no words of ours can describe the gratitude of the aged recipients of the above princely gifts'.⁹³ In this article, *Funny Folks* parodies the tradition of writing about the workhouse Christmas, noting the names of the visitors, the gifts given, and the gratitude of the pauper recipients, who cheer their benevolent patrons.

The following section, subtitled 'Reality', offers a pauper's interpretation of these charitable gestures. While the pauper accedes that, yes, they did receive some snuff, it was 'just enough to tickle our noses and shocking cheap and nasty stuff at that!'⁹⁴ Far from being grateful to the charitable visitors, the pauper says that 'to see 'em, that pompous old Mare and them Haldermen a-goin' round the workhuss to show theirselves! It most made us all sick'.⁹⁵ The text satirizes the visitors' parade around the workhouse as a self-conscious performance of power and draws attention to the idea of spectacle implicit in the workhouse Christmas. In attributing the paupers' cheers to the fact that 'the Master 'ad 'is hi on us', this pauper exposes this show of deferential gratitude as meaningless roleplay.

92. Moore, *Victorian Christmas*, p. 73.

93. 'Some Stereoscopic Views of Christmas', *Funny Folks*, 30 December 1882, p. 411.

94. 'Some Stereoscopic Views of Christmas', p. 411.

95. 'Some Stereoscopic Views of Christmas', p. 411.

While *Funny Folks* pokes fun at pompous workhouse visitors and their frugal charity, George R. Sims's political ballad, 'In the Workhouse: Christmas Day', takes a much more scathing stance towards these figures. The ballad, first published in *Referee* magazine in 1877, was both popular and controversial. Though it was 'recited through the length and breadth of the land', it was also 'on account of its attitude towards the "guardians," occasionally the cause of trouble'.⁹⁶ Armstrong points out that, 'Sims's dramatic monologue highlighted the hypocrisy of the seasonal gift in a system which effectively criminalized poverty, especially for the elderly, as well as demonstrating the condescending behaviour of wealthy visitors and the false deference of the paupers'.⁹⁷ As the controversial message of Sims's ballad subverts both the charitable ideology of the Victorian Christmas and the benevolence of the middle classes, it is easy to see why it proved objectionable to some.

The ballad opens with the depiction of the workhouse dining hall at Christmas; the hungry paupers, awaiting their annual feast, are watched by their generous benefactors:

And the guardians and their ladies,
Although the wind is east,
Have come in their furs and wrappers,
To watch their charges feast;
To smile and be condescending
Put pudding on pauper plates.
To be hosts at the workhouse banquet
They've paid for — with the rates'.⁹⁸

The construction of the visitors as 'hosts', rather than guests, draws attention to, and satirizes,

96. George R. Sims, 'The "Dagonet Ballads" How they Came to be Written', *NZ Truth*, 5 January 1907, p. 8.

97. Armstrong, *Christmas in Nineteenth-Century England*, p. 111.

98. George R. Sims, 'In the Workhouse: Christmas Day', in *The Dagonet and Other Poems*, by George R. Sims (Toronto: The Mussen Book Co., 1903 [1879]), pp. 8–15, ll. 15–16.

the visitors' sense of ownership over the workhouse space; the paupers are implicitly imagined by the visitors as unpaying 'guests' consuming the resources of their social betters. These visitors have contributed no private funding or donations to the workhouse Christmas, but simply by dint of paying their poor rates, lay claim to the identity of charitable philanthropist.

Although the majority of the paupers enact their set role of grateful guest 'with their "Thank'ee kindly, mum's"'', one pauper, John, subverts this show of bourgeois philanthropy and refuses his dinner.⁹⁹ As in the later narrative 'A Workhouse Episode', this rejection of charity serves to alarm the 'charitable' hosts:

The guardians gazed in horror,
The master's face went white;
'Did a pauper refuse the pudding?'
'Could their ears believe aright?'
Then the ladies clutched their husbands,
Thinking the man would die,
Struck by a bolt, or something,
By the outraged One on high.¹⁰⁰

The poem is heavily satiric of the workhouse visitors, whose self-importance approaches megalomania. Unlike the pauper in 'A Workhouse Episode', John consistently declines to accept the Christmas fare and refuses to be silenced. Insisting that his audience '[h]ear me right out to the end', Sims's pauper describes how, the previous Christmas, his beloved died due to the miserly refusal of the poor law guardians to grant 'bread for a starving wife'.¹⁰¹ Instead of nourishment, John relates that they were offered only the workhouse, a prospect which his wife

99. Sims, 'In the Workhouse', p. 9, l. 18.

100. Sims, 'In the Workhouse', p. 9, ll. 25–32.

101. Sims, 'In the Workhouse', p. 11, l. 58, 82.

could not bear. His narrative represents the guardians as murderers, their hands stained ‘foul and red’ with the blood of his wife and countless other victims.¹⁰²

The accusations contained in Sims’s ballad were topical. In 1876, the death of 53-year-old Charlotte Hammond was widely reported in the press. The article ‘Death from Starvation’, published in the *Huddersfield Chronicle*, details how a parish surgeon promised an ill and malnourished Charlotte two pounds of mutton. Rather than fulfilling the surgeon’s prescription, however, the workhouse relieving officer and guardians stipulated that Charlotte must come into the workhouse. In sensational language, the article relates how ‘[t]hen followed a battle in the courageous woman’s breast between death on the one hand and the Workhouse on the other’.¹⁰³ Like Sims’s fictional woman, Charlotte viewed the institution with ‘abhorrence’ and ultimately refused to become an indoor pauper, preferring instead to die at home.¹⁰⁴ The article attacks the ‘heartless’ officers who left Charlotte in this condition, relating that Mr Hardcastle (the aptly named guardian), ‘actually saw the woman in a dying state, when a few shillings would have relieved her, and yet went away determined to do nothing, because the woman was too obstinate to enter the Workhouse’.¹⁰⁵ In attributing blame to the ‘law of the land’, written by elected officials, the article argues that ‘[e]very doorpost in the land is sprinkled with her [Charlotte’s]

102. Sims, ‘In the Workhouse’, p. 9, ll. 39–40.

103. ‘Death from Starvation’, *Huddersfield Chronicle and West Yorkshire Advertiser*, 27 May 1876, p. 4.

104. ‘Death from Starvation’, p. 4. In 1876, the *Morning Post* commented upon a recent return on the number of deaths in the metropolis attributed to want of sufficient nourishment during the year 1875. The article concludes: ‘[it] is certain that no one need starve in London at the present day; that they should prefer starvation to the union is very much to be regretted, and ought to stir us up to making some alterations in the *régime* of those establishments, which without making them attractive to the lazy and idle, would remove the dread of going into them that makes death in the street or a wretched garret less repugnant to the well-disposed poor’. ‘Deaths from Starvation’, *Morning Post*, 28 July 1876, p. 3.

105. ‘Death from Starvation’, p. 4.

blood'.¹⁰⁶

Both article and poem emphasize the social injustice endured by the poor. The article points out that Charlotte died in the wealthiest part of the West End, 'with the rich and great riding luxuriously before the window'.¹⁰⁷ In juxtaposing the abject poverty of the lower classes with the consumerism of the well-to-do, the newspaper implicitly criminalizes the social blindness of the wealthy elite, who fail to see, or mitigate, the sufferings of the poor. Sims's poem likewise draws attention to the grim irony inherent in a woman starving to death 'in a land of plenty'.¹⁰⁸ In ridiculing the visitors, who believe they are carrying out a 'noble action', the poem dismantles the idealism of the charitable performance to reveal an immoral and unjust society.¹⁰⁹

IV. Conclusion

The numerous representations of workhouse philanthropy that flourished during the festive period are part of a dominant cultural narrative promoting seasonal charity to the poor. Such Christmas narratives tend to project a reassuring image of the institution, emphasising the domestic comfort and care extended to the destitute and offsetting anxieties about starvation or the separation of families within the workhouse. In staging the actions of philanthropic individuals, these texts feed into the cultural construction of an idealized middle-class identity and encourage readers to themselves participate in ideological rituals of giving. In privileging the performance of charity, these texts marginalize the pauper recipients; the role of the pauper is to signal gratitude to a charitable patron and a benevolent society of rate payers.

The performance of charity is unsettled, however, when the pauper recipient is

106. 'Death from Starvation', p. 4.

107. 'Death from Starvation', p. 4.

108. Sims, 'In the Workhouse', p. 14, l. 153.

109. Sims, 'In the Workhouse', p. 11, l. 67.

individualized. In texts that foreground the pauper, strains in the charitable Christmas narrative become apparent. Middle-class philanthropy is disrupted by paupers who either refuse to enact their role of grateful guest or when the festive cheer fails to supersede the bleakness of the workhouse. In particular, the construction of the charitable self is unsettled by texts that expose the limits of middle-class generosity and, in some instances, satirize the visitor as egotistical voyeur. Durbach suggests that gift exchange could ‘serve as a stabilizing force to blunt tensions around social and economic inequalities’.¹¹⁰ If so, then in stripping away the façade of Christmas cheer, these disruptive narratives instead bring such tensions to the fore, forcing a reader to confront the harsh treatment of the poor. In the final stanza of Sims’s narrative of rejected charity, the pauper orders the middle-class visitors to ‘Think of the happy paupers/ Eating your Christmas feast’.¹¹¹ The ironic message is also implicitly directed at an affluent reader guilty of a complacent attitude to the workhouse poor except at Christmas. As Moore argues, the workhouse can function as ‘a shameful reminder to readers that “Christian England” only feasts its paupers one day out of the year’.¹¹² In subverting the dominant narrative of Christmas charity, such disruptive texts simultaneously unsettle ideas of the charitable middle-class identity: if representations of the workhouse at Christmas do construct a sense of the idealized bourgeois self, then it is a self that is based upon deep social injustices.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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110. Durbach, ‘Roast Beef’, p. 970.

111. Sims, ‘In the Workhouse’, p. 15, ll. 163–64.

112. Moore, ‘Starvation in Victorian Christmas Fiction’, p. 495.