‘No More Than a Wild Beast or a Brute’: Wagner the Werewolf, Sweeney Todd and the Limits of Human Responsibility

Joseph Crawford

University of Exeter

Wagner the Werewolf (1846-7), generally regarded as the first major work of werewolf fiction in English, was also the first work to introduce Anglophone readers to the figure of the part-time monster. Vampires remain vampires even when they’re not currently thirsting for blood, and devils remain devils even when they’re not doing anything devilish, but Wagner looks and behaves like a normal man except when his curse comes upon him. It is only during his transformations that he becomes ‘no more than a wild beast or brute’.

Apt though it is to Wagner’s situation, this phrase is not from the novel: instead, it is drawn from the long-standing legal definition of the grounds under which a madman might be found not guilty of a crime which he had, in fact, committed. Under this rule – which held sway from 1724 to 1843 – a lunatic could only evade the legal consequences of their actions if they were committed in a state of frenzy, ‘like a wild beast’. In 1843, however, the introduction of the M’Naghten Rules overturned this convention, introducing for the first time the idea of being ‘not guilty by virtue of insanity’. After 1843, the madman no longer had to become an honourary animal in order to be seen as having parted company with human morality: if the criminal was sufficiently insane, even a crime knowingly and deliberately committed might be judged not to incur legal responsibility or moral guilt.

In this paper, I propose to examine Wagner in the context of these contemporary debates about reason, insanity, and morality. In particular I wish to compare its cursed protagonist with the vulpine villain of The String of Pearls, considering Wagner and Sweeney as examples of the pre- and post-M’Naghten models of the animalistic criminal as violent madman.

Joseph Crawford is a lecturer in English Literature at the University of Exeter. He is the author of three books: Raising Milton’s Ghost (Bloomsbury Academic, 2011), Gothic Fiction and the Invention of Terrorism (Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), and The Twilight of the Gothic (University of Wales Press, 2014). His current research deals with altered states of consciousness in early nineteenth-century Britain.