

A Fate Worse than Death? Post-mortem Punishment and the Criminal Corpse

Rachel Bennett

Becoming really dead takes time.

- Thomas Laqueur

The issues of death and dying hold a pervasive attraction across time and place and remain potent areas of contemplation in life. In particular the fate of the human body in death has been subject to a multitude of intense and contradictory debates founded in religious, secular and emotional beliefs. Focusing upon eighteenth century Britain, this research seeks to demonstrate how the state harnessed such beliefs in the pursuit of the post-mortem punishment of the criminal corpse.

Fears over post-mortem punishment:

visceral dismembering of the body involved in both hanging in chains and dissection.



Denial of a decent burial was a concern shared by the person about to die and the living.



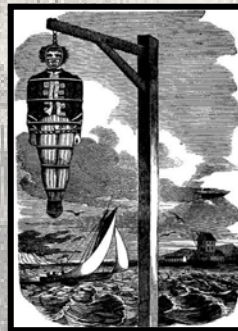
Questions of whether intact Christian burial of the body effected posthumous grace.

1752 Murder Act:

The act stipulated that the bodies of executed murderers should be either publically dissected or hung in chains in order to add some further terror and mark of infamy to the punishment of death. Using contemporary beliefs about the dead body my research questions what, if any, effect such post-mortem punishments had upon the criminal and anyone witnessing them.



William Hogarth 'Four Stages of Cruelty – The Reward for Cruelty' (1751)

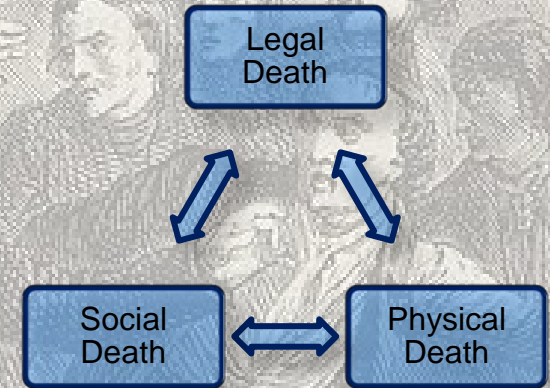


William Kidd hung in chains in 1701.



Skeleton of William Burke.

The death of the criminal was a process rather than an instantaneous occurrence.



The legal and social death of the criminal began with the pronouncing of the death sentence and was continued with the public execution at the gallows. However, the infliction of post-mortem punishments extended the legal death beyond the point of physical death. In addition, the public displaying of the corpse meant that the condemned suffered a prolonged social death. In the case of infamous criminals such as William Burke, whose skeleton remains on display in the Edinburgh Medical School's Anatomy Museum, we can question the point of his social death two centuries after his physical death. Combined with the fears and uncertainties surrounding the disposal of the body, this indeterminate point of death served to add the terror and infamy sought by the Murder Act.