

**“The Stone-eater, Giants, Ventriloquists, the Invisible Girl, ... All jumbled up together,
to compose, A Parliament of Monsters”: A Study of Posthuman Body and Death in
Nineteenth-century Britain**

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Introduction

This paper examines the display of medical museums within the context of nineteenth-century display cultures by tracing the journey of deceased bodies through various settings. It focuses on the afterlife of diseased body parts in the medical marketplace, exploring how they were collected and what became of them in collections. Pathologists, as students of disease, dissected corpses and preserved their parts through injection or immersion in fluid, transforming them into objects of material culture. These body parts followed intricate routes—sourced from hospital wards, donated to esteemed institutions, or further divided at auctions. As they were traded, human remains took on new significance, with the identities of anatomists and collectors overshadowing those of the original patients. Within museums, diseased specimens dominated medical collections, reassembled to create tangible representations of illness. Curators arranged these organic specimens alongside paintings, photographs, models, and detailed catalogues, using paper, wax, and text to create interconnected systems centred around the pathological body. The purpose of medical museums was to standardise education, but visitors resisted control, reacting with awe or revulsion.

It suggests that death, often considered a human-centred existential limit, should be understood as part of a broader, more-than-human materiality and processual existence that transcends traditional tragedy. This shifts the focus from human loss to a more interconnected, ecological understanding of life and death that includes nonhuman agencies.

Reimagining Bodies: Victorian Literature and ‘New’ Bodies

Victorian literature and popular culture, spanning roughly 1837–1901, were obsessed with the fragility of the human body and the tantalizing possibility of transcending it through science and machinery. In an era when Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* (1859) had already begun to erode the idea of humanity as the fixed apex of creation, three key texts and the broader print culture of the period articulated a radical shift: the natural, biological human body—long the measure of authenticity, morality, and social order—was losing its supremacy. Auguste Villiers de l’Isle-Adam’s *L’Ève future* (1886; translated as *The Future Eve*), Jane Loudon’s *The Mummy!* (1827), and the speculative articles in popular magazines such as *The Strand*, *Pearson’s*, and *Illustrated London Magazine* collectively announced the arrival of biotechnical bodies, that is, hybrids of flesh, mechanism, and electricity, that promised to outstrip the limitations of the “Anthropocene” human form. These works did not merely predict prosthetics or automata; they staged the end of the natural body’s cultural authority.

The Future Eve is the most explicit manifesto. Villiers presents Thomas Edison (reimagined as a metaphysical engineer) crafting Hadaly, an “android” whose exterior is a perfect replica of the beautiful but vacuous Alicia Clary, yet whose interior is a lattice of phonographic cylinders, electromagnetic relays, and artificial lungs powered by golden batteries. Hadaly is not a doll but a biotechnical entity: her skin is “animated by a subtle current,” her gestures choreographed by clockwork, her speech drawn from recorded literary masterpieces. Edison’s rhetoric is apocalyptic: “The natural woman is finished,” he declares. The biological female body, prone to hysteria, aging, and moral caprice, has been superseded by a manufactured ideal that preserves beauty, obedience, and intellectual refinement without the mess of menstruation, maternity, or mortality. Villiers’s satire is double-edged; he mocks both the male fantasy of control and the cultural anxiety that real women might soon be

obsolete. Yet the novel's lasting impact lies in its normalization of the idea that authenticity resides not in flesh but in design. Hadaly's body is the first fully articulated post-human prototype in Western literature: a body that announces the end of the carbon-based monopoly on personhood.

Jane Loudon's *The Mummy!*, published a full generation before Victoria's reign but reprinted and discussed throughout the century, takes a different route to the same destination. Set in 2126, the novel revives the Egyptian mummy Cheops not through magic but through galvanic reanimation: a jolt of electricity applied by an Oxford student restores the pharaoh's desiccated tissues to elastic life. Cheops's body is a palimpsest of biotechnics: mummified flesh re-electrified, ancient organs rebooted by Victorian science. Loudon's future Britain is a techno-theocracy where bodies are routinely "repaired" with mechanical lungs, clockwork hearts, and steam-powered limbs. The natural human form is depicted as a quaint relic; one character laments that "in the twenty-second century, no one is born—everyone is manufactured." Loudon's satire targets the hubris of progress, but her imagery, mummies walking London streets, women with "elastic steel ribs", normalizes the biotechnical body as the new somatic norm. The novel's popularity (it went through multiple editions and was excerpted in *Blackwood's*) helped embed the idea that the boundary between corpse and machine was porous, and that the "natural" body was already a historical curiosity.

Popular magazines amplified these literary visions into a pervasive cultural mood. *The Strand* (1891–1950) ran illustrated features on "Electrical Man" (1892), depicting a human silhouette laced with wires and batteries, captioned "The Body of the Future." *Cassell's Family Magazine* published "The Automaton Earl" (1884), a short story in which a nobleman replaces his failing organs with clockwork equivalents, only to discover that his new heart "ticks with perfect regularity—unlike the erratic pulse of mere flesh." *Pearson's Magazine* (1896–1939) went further, serializing speculative essays such as "Will Women Be

Superseded?” (1898), which cited *The Future Eve* and argued that “the artificial Eve will render the natural one redundant within a century.” These articles were not fringe; they appeared alongside household advice and celebrity interviews, normalizing the biotechnical imaginary. Patent-medicine advertisements in the same pages hawked “galvanic belts” and “electro-magnetic corsets” that promised to “renovate the human frame,” blurring the line between quackery and prophecy.

What unites these texts is their shared diagnosis: the natural biological body had become insufficient. Industrial accidents, cholera epidemics, and the spectacle of urban poverty exposed the body’s vulnerability; evolutionary theory undermined its sanctity; and the telegraph, phonograph, and X-ray revealed its mechanisms. The biotechnical body—whether Hadaly’s electromagnetic ideal, Cheops’s reanimated cadaver, or the wired silhouettes of magazine illustrations—offered a solution: a body that could be upgraded, repaired, or replaced. This was not mere fantasy; it was a cultural announcement that the Anthropocene human, defined by sweat, decay, and contingency, was being phased out. The supremacy of the natural body ended not with a bang but with a whirring gear and a spark of electricity, as Victorian culture began to dream in circuits.

This paper argues that the Victorian era radically redefined the concept of death. Death is no longer understood as the date of a living biological entity; instead, death is the death of the ‘natural-biological’ world. The active intervention of engineering into biology transcends the limits of the natural at the cost of the death of the natural. Bodies, monstrous or exceedingly perfect, are “de-formed, as in, they are crafted outside a womb. The womb, which signifies the first home of humankind, is abandoned by scientific laboratories. These laboratories, the womb, manufactured bodies that defy the general order of birth and death, and posit themselves as eternal. These lives could only emerge at the cost of the death of the traditional notions of life and death. Thus, Victorian science fiction writing reimagined the

idea of death, and the death of the natural-biological as the precondition of an alternative posthuman life.

Dead Bodies on Display: Medical Museums and the Culture of Body-exhibition

Bartholomew Fair in Smithfield, London, so William Wordsworth told us in *The Prelude*, “presented abnormal humanity at its grotesque extreme” (Alberti 1). And yet it was not unique. Deviant bodies, living and dead, were to be found in all corners of the nineteenth-century exhibitionary complex: not only in fairgrounds and freak shows, but also in private cabinets and grand museums, great exhibitions, and shilling anatomy shows. Bartholomew Fair was on one end of a spectrum that stretched to St Bartholomew’s Hospital, which a century later would be described as a ‘Valhalla of spoils snatched from the dead, the dying, the living, and those who have never been born’. Arthur Rackham, who painted the cover for St Bartholomew’s Hospital Museum manuscript catalogue, showing a demonic creature carrying a human skeleton. Victorian England’s fascination with grotesque, ‘abnormal’ bodies led to the infiltration of both private and public discourses.

In 19th-century Britain, “disembodied bodies” refers to fragmented human remains—such as dissected organs, pathological specimens, and bones—extracted from cadavers and preserved for display in medical museums. These collections transformed whole corpses into ‘dividual’ or partible bodies, dehumanizing them into study objects amid a cadaver shortage resolved by the 1832 Anatomy Act, which supplied unclaimed poor bodies from workhouses and hospitals. This practice profoundly shaped medical museums by enabling their growth as key sites for anatomy education and pathology research.

Before the Anatomy Act, body snatchers (‘resurrection men’) provided illicit corpses, fueling early anatomical collections like those of the Hunter brothers. Following 1832, legal access to over 57,000 unclaimed bodies in the following century enabled systematic dissection, with remains being retained for museums rather than being fully buried. This

influx commodified body parts as exchangeable goods, akin to manufactured items in industrial culture.

Specimens underwent processes such as embalming, bone cleaning, gelatin application, and later formalin-based methods to ensure display. These techniques materialized abstract diseases into tangible objects, often juxtaposed with normal anatomy, zoological items, or ethnographic skulls. Museums like those at the Royal College of Surgeons housed thousands of such preparations, creating “atlases of disease” for classification.

Fragmented bodies populated interstitial spaces in homes, schools, and hospitals, evolving into dedicated buildings by mid-century. Pathological collections advanced medical knowledge but sparked ethical tensions, including visitor disgust, vandalism, and gender restrictions. Public and professional displays blurred education with spectacle, influencing Gothic fiction and prompting modern regulations like the 2004 Human Tissue Act.

Haraway’s cyborg echoes 19th-century fragmentation by rejecting Edenic unity, positioning both as ‘monstrous’ challenges to phallogocentric wholeness. Victorian specimens prefigure cyborg partiality, yet lacked Haraway's emphasis on pleasure in contradiction and subversion of domination. Modern prosthetics extend this hybridity, linking anatomical history to posthuman futures.

Victorian medical displays, featuring fragmented and preserved body parts in anatomy museums, laid the groundwork for posthuman thought by deconstructing the humanist ideal of the bounded, autonomous body into relational, partible components. These exhibits, enabled by the 1832 Anatomy Act, treated human remains as “dividual bodies” for pathological study, challenging unified selfhood and foreshadowing posthuman critiques of embodiment. This material practice influenced theorists like Donna Haraway and Rosi Braidotti, who drew on such histories to argue for bodies as hybrid, mutable assemblages.

Displays reduced cadavers to interchangeable specimens—organs in jars, skeletons, wax models—commodifying them as objects in a culture of dissection and industrial exchange. Posthumanism adopts this partible person concept, viewing bodies as distributed across networks, akin to cyborgs or biotechnological entities without fixed essence. Museums' focus on disease sites isolated pathology from the whole, paralleling posthuman deconstruction of nature/culture binaries.

Grotesque exhibits like Lam Qua's portraits or Kahn's museum fostered "organs-without-body" gazes, training vision on detached parts and evoking horror or wonder that prefigures posthuman fascination with the monstrous. This visual discourse influenced posthuman genealogy, linking colonial dissections to contemporary body modifications and enhancements. Ethical debates over dehumanization echoed in modern Human Tissue Acts, informing posthuman ethics of vulnerability and relationality.

Victorian spectacles blurred education and sensation, inspiring posthuman art and theory that recasts bodies as sites of infection, fusion, and transformation. Thinkers reference these displays to critique humanist anthropocentrism, promoting fluid ontologies seen in prosthetics or genetic engineering. The shift from whole cadavers to parts thus seeded posthumanism's rejection of purity myths for hybrid futures.

Victorian anatomical spectacles featured preserved body parts, wax models, and skeletons displayed in public and professional museums, blending education with sensationalism. Key exhibits included dissected pathologies, embryological series, and interactive figures that drew crowds amid the cadaver shortages resolved by the 1832 Anatomy Act.

The Death Culture: Major Museums, Public Interests, and Posthuman Imaginations

- **Hunterian Museum (Royal College of Surgeons, London):** John Hunter's vast collection of over 10,500 specimens, including skeletons, preserved organs, and pathologies like Charles Byrne's giant skeleton; open to select public, emphasizing comparative anatomy.
- **Kahn's Anatomical Museum (Oxford Street/Piccadilly, London):** Wax models of venereal diseases, embryological foetuses, "anatomical Venus," Niam-Niams ("men with tails"), and onanism effects; lectured daily, toured provinces, closed 1873 as obscene.
- **Gordon Museum (Guy's Hospital, London):** Joseph Towne's wax models of dermatology, pathologies, tumors (e.g., Lam Qua paintings), Lister's antiseptic spray; systematic by organ, for students and select visitors.
- **Rackstrow's Museum (Strand, London):** Guillaume Desnoües and Abraham Chovet's wax figures, real preparations in spirits, "figured moulding from a dissected woman"; early public venue, closed late 1780s.

Human remains in 19th-century secular British culture featured prominently in anatomical museums and public displays, where unclaimed bodies from the poor—supplied legally via the 1832 Anatomy Act—were dissected into fragmented specimens like organs, skeletons, and pathologies preserved in spirits or as wax models. This commodification reflected secularization's shift from sacred Christian burial to scientific materialism, treating bodies as objects for education against atheism and for public health knowledge, evident in museums like Kahn's, where venereal diseases and anomalies were shown to working-class crowds.

These practices prefigure posthumanism by dismantling humanist embodiment: individual bodies as partible commodities challenge bounded selfhood, akin to Haraway's cyborg hybrids, rejecting organic purity for relational assemblages. Fragmentation in secular

displays—organs isolated as “organs-without-body”—echoes posthuman critiques of anthropocentrism, where bodies become mutable networks, influencing biopolitical analyses of colonialism and technology.

Victorian newspapers covered anatomy exhibitions with a mix of curiosity, endorsement, and criticism, often highlighting their educational value while noting sensational aspects. Medical journals like *The Lancet* praised collections such as Kahn’s Museum for embryological models and anatomical Venuses, recommending them to professionals and the public despite concerns over ladies’ access.

General press like *The Athenaeum* promoted shows such as Sarti’s 1839 Venus as suitable for “younger male readers” to gain anatomical ideas “without labour or disgust.” *The Lancet* lauded Kahn’s 1851 Oxford Street opening as “much gratified,” especially syphilis displays for doctors, and noted “golden opinions” after provincial tours. Proprietors advertised widely post-Anatomy Act 1832, framing models as dissection alternatives amid body-snatching scandals.

The medical marketplace in 19th-century Britain commodified human cadavers and fragments as morbid bodies—diseased organs, skeletons, and preparations—traded among anatomists, hospitals, and showmen post-Anatomy Act 1832. Post-mortem journeys began with unclaimed poor bodies from workhouses, dissected in schools like Grainger’s, then fragmented for museums (e.g., Hunterian), auctions, or spectacles like Kahn’s, where identities were erased for utility.

These journeys deconstruct humanist wholeness into dividual, relational morbid bodies prefiguring posthumanism’s cyborgian, networked forms sans origin myths (Haraway). Fragmentation commodifies flesh as technology-infused matter, challenging anthropocentrism in biotech eras.

Postmortem specimens circulated in 19th-century Britain’s medical marketplace through a

structured supply chain from workhouses/hospitals to dissectors, then fragmented for trade among schools, museums, and auctions.

This marketplace dividualized bodies into commodified parts, prefiguring posthumanism's rejection of unified humanism for hybrid, exchangeable forms—bodies as parliaments of monsters in relational networks. Public exhibitions of human remains in 19th-century Britain demystified the corpse, fostering secular views of the body as a dissectible machine rather than a sacred vessel, while heightening anxieties over dehumanization and mortality. Crowds flocked to shows like Kahn's Museum, blending wonder with moral warnings on vices, which normalized anatomical fragmentation but provoked backlash for obscenity, ultimately restricting such displays.

19th-century disembodied bodies—fragmented anatomical specimens from dissected cadavers—evolved into conceptual precursors of posthuman bodies through processes that deconstructed humanist wholeness into partible, technological hybrids preserved via arterial injection, spirits, and wax. Practices in museums like the Hunterian or Kahn's commodified pathologies as exchangeable objects, challenging Cartesian mind-body dualism by materializing flesh as manipulable matter.

Preservation techniques (mercurial injection, gelatine, later formalin) turned decaying corpses into durable preparations, akin to industrial products—bodies as prostheses or cyborg assemblages without unified identity. This dividuality (parts over wholes) mirrors posthumanism's (Hayles, Haraway) view of embodiment as informational patterns, not fixed biology.

Public spectacles normalized fragmentation, influencing Gothic/posthuman fiction where bodies reassemble as monsters/cyborgs, critiquing humanism's purity myths for hybrid futures.

Tracing Posthuman Traits in Victorian Literary and Material Cultures

Posthumanist readings reinterpret 19th-century anatomical displays as sites of deconstructed embodiment, where fragmented human specimens challenge humanist notions of wholeness, autonomy, and anthropocentrism. Displays like Kahn's wax syphilis models or Hunterian's pathologies reduced bodies to dividual parts—organs-without-body—prefiguring posthuman theories of relational, hybrid forms.

Haraway's cyborg hybridity finds echoes in preserved preparations (wax-injected, jarred), fusing organic flesh with technology, blurring life/death and human/machine boundaries. Lam Qua's tumor portraits exemplify "organs-without-body" isolating pathologies as autonomous entities, akin to Deleuze's body without organs.

Braidotti's nomadic subjects emerge in displays' networks: specimens exchanged in marketplaces, juxtaposed with zoological/ethnographic items, revealing bodies as entangled assemblages. Freak show overlaps (e.g., heteradelph child) disrupt normative humanity, seeding posthuman vital materialism.

A posthumanist study of body and death in 19th-century Britain reveals anatomical displays and post-mortem practices as sites where humanist embodiment dissolved into fragmented, technological morbid bodies, challenging death's finality and humanity's boundedness. Dissection under the 1832 Anatomy Act commodified pauper corpses into preserved specimens—organs, skeletons—for museums, extending life through science while erasing identity.

Displays like Kahn's heteradelph or Hunterian's pathologies dividualized bodies into interchangeable parts, prefiguring Haraway's cyborgs: wax-injected flesh fused with preservatives, blurring organic/mechanical. Post-mortems (70%+ in asylums) mapped diseases as organs-without-body, treating death as an informational pattern, not an end.

Asylums' dead-houses and photography 'animated' corpses via dissection, masks, posing—vital materialism where remains persist as data for pathology. Secular shift from sacred burial to utility (Chadwick reforms) echoes Braidotti's nomadic death, bodies as relational assemblages beyond anthropocentrism.

Burial reforms in 19th-century Britain, driven by Edwin Chadwick's 1843 Sanitary Report exposing overcrowded graveyards' health risks, led to the 1852 Burial Acts closing urban churchyards and mandating new cemeteries, shifting from communal home wakes to sanitized, privatized interments. Literary representations of decay mirrored this, portraying lingering, corrupted corpses as symbols of social disorder and reform's failures.

Chadwick's campaign highlighted shallow graves, body re-emergence, and miasma, prompting nonconformist cemeteries like Kensal Green (1832) for class-segregated burial. Reforms disrupted working-class rituals (home preparation, wakes), favoring bourgeois efficiency and respectability.

Dickens's *Our Mutual Friend* (1865) depicts Boffins' cemetery scavenging and Gaffer Hexam's Thames corpses resisting burial, critiquing commodified death amid reforms. Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895) Sue's baby burial violation evokes reform-era desecration fears, decay as moral pollution.

Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848) shows working-class wakes clashing with reform hygiene, corpses' odors symbolizing industrial decay. Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) Heathcliff's grave-digging defies sanitized closure, lingering rot asserting communal bonds over state control. Literature resists reforms' dehumanization, decay as undead persistence.

Medical journals like *The Lancet* influenced 19th-century literary portrayals of corpses by disseminating clinical details of dissection, autopsies, and anatomy, shaping fiction's realistic yet grotesque depictions amid the 1832 Anatomy Act and body scandals.

Journals detailed pathologies and procedures, providing authors with somatic language for horror, reform critiques, and the body's fragmentation.

The Lancet's case reports and illustrations informed Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1838), Bill Sikes's hanging corpse, and *Bleak House* Nemo's dissection, evoking journal-like detachment amid resurrectionist fears. Collins's *The Woman in White* (1860) autopsy scenes echo *Lancet* post-mortems, corpse as evidence.

Journals campaigned against body-snatching (*The Lancet* exposed Burke/Hare 1829), influencing Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), Heathcliff's grave-digging, and Hardy's *Jude the Obscure* (1895), which desecrated infant burial, symbolizing Act's class violence.

Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) internalizes *Lancet*-style degeneration theories; Poe's "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar" (1845) mesmerized decay mirrors journal vivisection reports. Medical discourse medicalized literary decay as a biopolitical threat.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have seen how Victorian culture immersed itself in the culture of death. Death was no longer seen as life's radical Other, but it emerged as a potential site for new lives. The death of the biological order in the Victorian era, and its experimentations with life and death, led to the imagining of the human beyond its natural/biological definitions. Posthumanism as a theoretical term and the theory itself were not present at this time; however, the quest to destabilize the anthropocentric worldviews seemed not alien to the era's most profound minds.

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