Introduction

Corpses are prone to surprising economic entanglements in the nineteenth century. Although death is traditionally perceived as a moment of transition from worldly to spiritual concerns, this is countered by numerous literary and historical examples. Among the many sensational incidents that comprise Ellen Wood's *East Lynne* (1860–1861), there is a remarkable scene in which Lord Mount Severn's corpse is arrested for the debts he failed to settle in life. The bailiffs refuse to allow the body to be encoffined or proceed to burial until the outstanding monies are paid; by delaying the standard religious observances, the transition to the afterlife is forestalled. Discomfortingly, the corpse remains in the material world, and becomes a material object within it. The peer's body is treated like that of a living debtor, imprisoned until his bills are paid, but also like a standard piece of household property, capable of being seized in settlement. Material demands encroach upon sacred rights. This is compounded by the fleeting reference to another insolvent corpse, this time of a church dignitary, which is 'arrested as it was being carried through the cloisters to its grave in the cathedral'.[1] Figuratively and literally, on sacred grounds the dead are no longer held sacrosanct. In these moments the central concerns of this book crystallise: imbrication of the secular and the sacred; the emotional and financial relationships that govern interactions between the living and the dead; connections between corpses, property and money; whom (if anyone) corpses belong to; what they are worth; and the unexpected ways in which they can be appropriated. Endowing a corpse with financial value through ransom seems like a waking nightmare to the heir, who questions 'Am I awake, or dreaming?'[2] Yet in less overt forms, reactions to the commodification of death varied from acceptance, to ambivalence, to aspiration. After discharging the creditors, the new Lord Mount Severn immediately turns to a socially condoned branch of death commerce, ordering the funeral and mourning-wear with 'everything suited' to the status of the deceased.[3]

Body-snatching represented the commodification of death in its most explicit and distressing form. Corpses were needed for anatomisation, but the legal supply was limited due to the abhorrence that surrounded dissection. From the late sixteenth century grave-robbing helped to supply the demand and by the 1720s 'a new strata of entrepreneurs' had rendered body-snatching 'a comonplace'.[4] Cadavers were stolen from their graves, robbed of their dignity and identity, and treated like merchandise:

> Corpses were bought and sold, they were touted, priced, haggled over, negotiated for, discussed in terms of supply and demand, delivered, imported, exported, transported. Human bodies were ... trussed up in sacks, roped like hams, sewn in canvas, packed in cases, casks, barrels, crates and hampers; salted, pickled, or injected with preservative. ... They were stored in cellars and on quays. Human bodies were dismembered and sold in pieces, or measured and sold by the inch.[5]

A peculiar fascination and horror attended the perpetrators of such acts, as Thomas Hood's darkly comic poem, 'Jack Hall' (1827), reveals. The eponymous Jack is not only a body-snatcher, but a funerary mute, and even brokers his own corpse. The nominal pun on 'jackal' hints at further, cannibalistic crimes. Once death is perceived as saleable, the scale of commodification escalates rapidly: as undertaker and body-snatcher Jack profits twice from the same body, while his extreme self-alienation allows him to sell his own corpse twelve times over.[6] In *The Mysteries of London* (1844–46), G. M. W. Reynolds graphically describes the activities of a Resurrection Man; Dickens used the historical setting of *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) to portray grave robbery; and Robert Louis Stevenson provided a thinly-disguised fictionalisation of the Burke and Hare murders in his short story 'The Body Snatcher' (1884).[7] That the body-snatcher continued to haunt the Victorian cultural imagination, long after he was officially rendered obsolete, suggests a displaced anxiety about the more ambiguous ways that the corpse was treated as a commodity.

This study begins in 1832, at a pivotal moment in the commodification of death. In the same year that Dickens was establishing his name as a parliamentary reporter, the Anatomy Act was passed. The Act made the unclaimed bodies of those dying in workhouses and hospitals available for dissection, thus supplying the needs of the expanding medical schools. The legislation aimed to limit the commodification of death: anatomists were no longer at the mercy of Resurrection Men who demanded anything from eight to twenty guineas for a cadaver.[8] However, as Elizabeth Hurren argues, the records left by the Victorian information state expose

> the dark underworld of a body business that was supposed to have been outlawed by the Anatomy Act. Bodies were not being resurrected from graves at night as in the eighteenth century. Instead they never reached the earth intact. Most were traded behind the closed doors of a London workhouse.[9]

The Act thus facilitated the shift from a trade that was illegal, to one that was discreetly practised but technically sanctioned. It indicates that the commodification of death was increasingly condoned in the nineteenth century. This was despite the folklore traditions and general conventions of respect that endow the corpse – in principle, if not in practice – with a sacred aspect that made the idea of direct commodification repellent.[10] This book engages with conflicting views of the corpse as a sacred and a commercial object and explores the many ways in which the overt commodification of death persisted following the Act. It touches on aspects of the trade that have inspired excellent, full length treatment elsewhere, including the traffic in medical specimens, body parts, and paupers' bodies (Alberti, 2011; Hurren, 2012). However, this study is also concerned with death commodification in a broader sense, whereby death becomes an occasion for profit. This includes the commercialisation that generated death commodities such as coffins and mourning fashions; the development of joint-stock cemetery companies; and the calculations inherent in wills and life insurance policies that grant the body a certain financial value, only released at death.

Charles Dickens's career offers an ideal framework through which to explore death commodification. Not only was the author intrigued by corpses – as John Carey attests, he 'never missed a human carcass if he could help it' – but his work demonstrates a particular sensitivity to death's materiality and its occurrence within commercial contexts.[11] Dickens witnessed and wrote about major developments in death, consumer and commodity cultures. He was an outspoken critic of those he considered to profit from death by trading 'on the very coffin-lid'.[12] Yet at the same time, the exuberant portrayals of undertakers and set-piece funerals in his fiction suggest the author's fascination with making death generative instead of defunctive. Like the undertakers, sextons, sick nurses and other death-dealers that populate his work, Dickens sometimes depended on a good corpse for his livelihood, fuelling a powerful ambivalence in his writing. Sometimes Dickens distanced himself from the authorial profits of death, but on other occasions he expressed a playful affinity with death professionals. An uneasy self-awareness underlies the anecdote of Dickens sending a business card to the editor of *Bell's Life in London*, Vincent Dowling,

in 1835 announcing himself as 'CHARLES DICKENS, | Resurrectionist, | In search of a Subject'.[13] Throughout his career, Dickens was accused of burking his characters for a quick profit, making the writer-as-Resurrectionist metaphor curiously appropriate.[14] Dickens's scathing criticisms of Wellington's state funeral and London's overcrowded burial-grounds were intended to effect change, and the powerful deathbed scene of Jo the crossing-sweeper is clearly a demand for action. However, for Dickens, death commodification was as much a subject of personal predilection as politics. The length and progress of his career allows Dickens's complex attitude towards death commodification to be traced, as he himself aged and experienced the deaths of friends and relatives, before concluding with the post-mortem commodification precipitated by the author's decease in 1870.

There is a longstanding history of death being accompanied by significant financial expenditure. In the thirteenth century the wealthy made provision for ongoing masses to aid the repose of their souls, through huge endowment funds.[15] Royal funerals often involved costly display in order to consolidate political power.[16] By the late sixteenth century commerce had started to impinge upon the parish guilds that performed burials for the laity, while the first undertaker's shop was established in 1675.[17] From the late seventeenth century the 'vogue' for extravagant aristocratic funerals was beginning to spread down the social scale; Clare Gittings notes that 'funerals were not immune from the growing commercialism and individual consumerism that were such characteristic features of eighteenth-century Britain'.[18] Criticism of the trade is equally long established. In 1701, Richard Steele's *The Funeral: Or, Grief à la Mode* satirised the practice of 'raising an Estate by providing Horses, Equipage, and Furniture, for those that no longer need'em.'[19] In *The Grave* (1743), Robert Blair censured undertakers as a

> Sable Tribe, that painful watch
> The sick Man's Door, and live upon the Dead,
> By letting out their Persons by the Hour
> To mimick Sorrow, when the Heart's not sad.[20]

The parasitic nature of undertakers and lack of authentic feeling associated with costly funeral display continued to be subjects of critique and comedy in Victorian representations.

In the nineteenth century, the commercialisation of death rapidly intensified, as the desire and ability to emulate upper class mourning rituals became more widespread. Death became more secularised and Heaven was

increasingly perceived in anthropocentric terms, 'more like a middle-class suburb in the sky than the city of God'.[21] As the first chapter explores, the growing wealth of the expanding middle classes allowed them to mark their 'respectability' through costly funereal display. The resulting demand for death-related goods and services was met and further stimulated by the professionalisation of undertaking, and industrial technologies that made products more affordable.[22] It is important to note that the material, spiritual, and financial details of mourning were rooted in 'distinct class-bound death cultures'.[23] There is evidence that the demand for ostentatious funeral display percolated down the social scale, and persisted among the lower-middle and working classes despite the growing trend for simplicity in the 1870s.[24] However, Julie-Marie Strange has also argued compellingly for the need to recognise the 'diverse, multifaceted face of grief' among the working classes, instead of restricting analysis to funeral expenditure.[25] While sensitive to these nuances, this study focuses predominantly on what Agatha Herman calls a 'consumerist middle-class death culture', and is largely concerned with metropolitan representations.[26]

The commercialisation that surrounded death was supported by a burgeoning commodity culture, which had origins in the eighteenth century but developed rapidly in the Victorian period. Thomas Richards locates the symbolic inauguration of this culture in the Great Exhibition of 1851, which inculcated new consumer practices and made the commodity 'the one subject of mass culture, the centerpiece of everyday life, the focal point of all representation, the dead centre of the modern world.'[27] Andrew H. Miller has described the mid-Victorian fear that the 'social and moral world was being reduced to a warehouse of goods and commodities', which creates 'lines of tension' in the novels of the period, producing intriguing 'narrative difficulties and affective ambivalences'.[28] Further studies by Christoph Lindner (2003) and Catherine Waters (2008) have detailed the problems and pleasures of navigating this new age. My work builds on this foundation to position death commodification as a particularly exciting and distinctive aspect of commodity culture, which tests how far the marketplace should extend. The commercial activity that surrounds the corpse is especially troubling because it forces the individual to confront their own future objecthood. As Julia Kristeva famously noted in her essay on abjection, the corpse forces recognition that 'it is no longer I who expel, "I" is expelled'.[29] Profiting from death is an act of 'contested commodification', which provokes feelings of 'personal and social conflict about the processes and the result'.[30] The weird, ambivalent representations of mortality that emerge demand further attention.

I use 'commodity' in a broader sense than the strict Marxian one. For Marx, a commodity is a good or service which has a 'use-value' for others and is produced by human labour for sale or trade.[31] Fetishism mystifies the commodity, resulting in goods that conceal their origins and the relations between the people that made them.[32] Death rarely fulfils all the criteria for Marx's definition, even in its concrete manifestation as a corpse. Only in limited, often medical contexts, does the cadaver have an immediate use-value. Furthermore, it is not a manufactured product of human labour, nor is it typically produced for exchange; Burke and Hare's 'production' of sixteen bodies for an Edinburgh medical school in 1828, and the murders committed in 1831 by the London Burkers, Bishop and Williams, are potent exceptions. The effects of reification, caused by commodity fetishism, are of interest to this study, but fetishes in the anthropological and psychoanalytic senses – as objects that have inherent magical properties or protect against absence – are also relevant to death and mourning practices. My use of the term 'commodity' is informed by a number of important revisions. Arjun Appadurai suggested that we 'start with the idea that a commodity is *any thing intended for exchange*' and highlighted the 'calculative dimension' of non-monetary situations of exchange, such as gift giving and barter.[33] This allows for the existence of commodities within preindustrial and non-capitalist societies. Appadurai also emphasises that 'things can move in *and* out of the commodity state . . . such movements can be slow or fast, reversible or terminal, normative or deviant', providing a useful way to think about the social life of death-related objects.[34] A coffin, for example, might start out as a death commodity made by an undertaker such as Sowerberry and ornamented with 'iron handles come by canal from Birmingham'.[35] Burial removes it from circulation for a time, but the wood and coffin furniture might later reappear in the stores of marine-dealers, as the demand for burial space resulted in frequent disinterments.[36]

Thing Theory has extended further possibilities by uncovering richer, more complex versions of subject-object relations than those proposed by Marx.[37] Elaine Freedgood argues for,

> The possibility for reading things as things – of taking them literally, materially, and then returning them to the novel with lost associations and possibilities restored – [which] has been forestalled, paradoxically, by the commodity criticism of the novel that needs to be cleared away so that we can see the meaningful stuff 'behind' it.[38]

Freedgood outlines a 'thing culture' that preceded and coexisted with commodity culture, in which object relations were not limited to 'the

abstraction of the commodity into a money value, the spectacularisation of the consumer good, [and] the alienation of things from their human and geographical origins'.[39] Strong metonymic readings that explore historical and sociological contexts are used to recover the 'fugitive meanings' encoded in things such as the mahogany furniture in *Jane Eyre*. Freedgood's work is compelling, although I concur with Juliet John in finding the distinction between things and commodities too oppositional in places.[40] Indeed, it is in the interests of this study to avoid such binaries because corpses and other death-related objects themselves evade rigid categorisation. John Plotz outlines how

> certain belongings come to seem dually endowed: they are at once products of a cash market and, potentially, the fruits of a highly sentimentalised realm of value both domestic and spiritual, a realm defined by being anything but marketable.[41]

This is the condition of many objects related to death, which simultaneously bear commercial and affective values. For example, Wemmick's mourning jewellery in *Great Expectations* is both readily saleable 'portable property' and as Waters writes 'a repository of affection'.[42] Religious relics are another type of thing that holds this dual value, seen as priceless by believers due to their transcendent, magical properties, but at the same time possessing lively commercial histories.[43] This study traces the commodification of death and its effects, but as this brief survey outlines, it allows for some flexibility in the definition of 'commodity' provided that the death object is treated as being of commercial interest at some point in its life cycle.

The aforementioned studies of material and commodity cultures provide a foundation for my work, in addition to several landmark social histories of death (Morley, 1971; Litten, 1991; Curl, 2000; Wolffe, 2000). Pat Jalland's work has been particularly useful in balancing the assumptions of her predecessors with extensive archival research, to demonstrate how death culture was experienced in everyday life.[44] Although seminal, Philippe Ariès's *The Hour of Our Death* (1973, trans. 1981) has been less influential, because its focus on French Catholic experience, and broad historical sweep, results in an oversimplified view of death in Victorian Britain. Dickens's complex presentation of mortality has received critical attention from Garrett Stewart and Andrew Sanders, among others. Sanders provides a compelling analysis of the personal and historical factors that shape the author's view of death, but deliberately isolates his discussion from the commercial environment that surrounded Dickens. Sanders states:

> he neither killed characters for the market ... nor for fictional convenience ... Dickens wrote of dying children because so many nineteenth-century families, including his own, lost children in infancy; he described pious adult death-beds because he had attended them;[45]

To me such a separation seems artificial; an understanding of Dickens's fascination with death can be greatly enriched by embracing the commercial elements that he makes little effort to hide.

Limited attention has been given to the commodification of death in the nineteenth century. Notable exceptions include chapters on Dickens by Mary Elizabeth Hotz and Catherine Waters, and Sally Powell's work on the black market commodification of the corpse in penny bloods, which she argues is symptomatic of a wider sense that 'the sanctity of selfhood is threatened by the aggressive commercial forces generated by the industrial city.'[46] Elizabeth Hurren's study has also been illuminating, despite its focus on the late Victorian period, in that it captures the human stories of death commodification as experienced by the poor following the 1832 Anatomy Act. There is also a growing body of work on hair jewellery, relic culture and other manifestations of Victorian mourning.[47] My work in the first chapter and the book as a whole is indebted to Waters' original discussion of forms of trading in death in *Household Words*. Naturally we cover some of the same material, and my own argument follows a similar line to her conclusions that Dickens establishes 'a narrative of capitalist entrepreneurship against a narrative of non-commodifiable objects, of inalienable and incommensurable values' and 'suggests that some things cannot or should not be alienated in this way, that certain forms of commodification threaten personhood'.[48] My discussion aims to extend previous studies by giving a sense of the sheer variety and recurrence of death commodity in Dickens's work and society in general. It explores the unease provoked by the spectacles and spaces of death positioned between respect and commercialism; it investigates the troubling implications for the consuming subject; and it looks towards possible alternatives. No strict theoretical framework is adopted to avoid restricting the complexities of Dickens's prose. Instead, I have drawn selectively on theoretical material when it seems to illuminate the text, hoping to achieve what Walter Benjamin, quoting Goethe, called 'the delicate empiricism that becomes true theory'.[49]

This study traces Dickens's ambivalence about the commodification of death from its prominent manifestations in a thriving death-based consumer culture to the complex representations that appear in his later work. The first chapter draws upon *Martin Chuzzlewit* and selections from the

journalism to explore the carnivalesque mourning practices and ostentatious funerals that the author found both reprehensible and powerfully engaging. Subsequently I turn to the associated professionals and profiteers, and to spaces in which death and commerce collided. A concluding analysis of *A Tale of Two Cities* is used to suggest the sophisticated, bifurcated manifestations of death commodification that occupy the remainder of the book. The following chapter on *The Old Curiosity Shop* registers Dickens's ambivalent feelings about the authorial profits of death, resulting in a wonderfully vertiginous text in which corpses can be utterly sentimentalised or commercialised. This anxiety plays out in motifs of revaluation and death-based storytelling, but is only fully resolved towards the end of Dickens's career in *Doctor Marigold's Prescriptions*. The third and fourth chapters provide explorations of a single novel, focusing on *Bleak House* and *Our Mutual Friend* respectively. The former considers the intersections of death and property, while the latter suggests an acceptance of death commodification while simultaneously rehearsing the experience of losing 'things' that can later be reclaimed. I conclude with attempts to deal with the loss of the author through a commemorative process that also commodifies.

CHAPTER 1

Profitable undertakings and deathly business

The black crape-trimmed clothing, jet jewellery and black-bordered stationery are familiar manifestations of Victorian mourning. This paraphernalia was supplemented by many more fatuous items, such as mourning teapots, mourning pin cushions and mourning bathing costumes.[1] Pat Jalland rightly questions how widespread the consumption of such articles was, but their continuing existence reflects the burgeoning consumer culture surrounding mortality.[2] The commercialisation of death was also expressed in spectacular funerals, leading Edwin Chadwick to estimate in his *Supplementary Report . . . into the Practice of Interment in Towns* (1843) that £4 to £5 million was 'annually thrown into the grave at the expense of the living'.[3] These developments were supported by the expansion and professionalisation of various businesses of death. Alongside the traditional roles of doctors, sick-nurses, sextons and undertakers, organisations such as joint-stock cemetery companies and life insurance firms flourished.[4] Timothy Alborn categorises the latter as 'more directly than any other enterprise apart from slavery . . . set[ting] a price on human life'.[5] Dickens's work features many of these forms of trading in death.[6] Often 'business' is used by Dickens to denigrate an approach to mortality more prosaic than respectful, or the treatment of death as a matter of profit or social form. It also provides a convenient rhetoric to detach individuals from the discomforting realities of their business, as when the body-snatcher Jerry Cruncher refers to himself as an 'honest tradesman'. In his commentary Dickens voiced concerns felt more widely, particularly among middle-class reformers.[7] Yet as this chapter shows, the author's portrayal of a growing culture of death-based consumption was striking in the imagination and ambivalence of its critique.

Several factors contributed to the commercialisation of death. The value placed on sentiment and the unique quality of the individual in the Romantic period had intensified the demand for commemoration.[8] As the centrality of the Church declined, 'doctors began to take the place of