

"A Regiment of Skeletons and an Army of Bottles": Reading the Hunterian Museum in Nineteenth-Century Scientific and Popular Culture

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Article abstract

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Romanticism on the Net

“A Regiment of Skeletons and an Army of Bottles”: Reading the Hunterian Museum in Nineteenth-Century Scientific and Popular Culture

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Abstract

Closely associated with, and used as a demonstration of the professionalization of medicine, anatomy museums and the bodies they displayed were troubled by associations ranging from the outmoded cabinet of curiosity to quackery. The myriad publications produced by educational anatomy museums foregrounded an ambition to make museums a scientific space, and the human and animal body a scientific subject through material and textual ordering. They intended to educate by placing objects in series that told a specific story, by taxonomising and cataloguing, lecturing and labelling, pinning knowledge both to the body’s material form, and the texts that illuminated it. This use of narrative was not a one-way adoption of literary techniques to legitimize institutions; literary culture frequently borrowed the ordering principles of the museum, mediating both the popular understanding of museum spaces, and the potentially sensational representation of bodies in reportage and fiction. This paper reads the catalogues, guidebooks and specimen representations of the Hunterian Museum in the Royal College of Surgeons, England, alongside its representation in Charles Dickens’s popular periodical *Household Words* to consider how knowledge is hermeneutically constructed, legitimizing anatomical intermediality and the museum project.

Biographical Note

Verity Burke is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Birmingham. Her PhD thesis undertook an intermedial examination of anatomy museums and literature in the nineteenth century. She has developed this interest in the interactions between museum and literary culture in her current role as research assistant on the AHRC-funded project ‘Narrativizing Dinosaurs: Science and Popular Culture from 1850 to Present’.

1. Cabinets of curiosities (or *wunderkammer*), with their dizzying plethora of objects ranging from stuffed alligators to tiny foetal skeletons, were collections of wondrous objects that, like the modern museum, were intended to reflect upon the world around us. By the nineteenth century, however, the cabinet of curiosity had suffered a fall from grace. The ordering principles of the Enlightenment shifted collecting and exhibitionary practices, until the profusion of exotic bodies that had previously constituted educational collections had fallen out of style (Alberti, *Morbid Curiosities* 14). As Samuel Alberti notes, “Victorian observers commended order, and confusion was cause for opprobrium,” while Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park assert that “wonder [had] become a disreputable passion in workaday science, redolent of the popular, the amateurish, and the childish” (Alberti, “The Museum Affect” 381, 389; Daston and Park, *Wonder and the Order of Nature* 14-15). Anatomy museums derived from this colourful lineage; the imagery of museums such as that of Frederik Ruysch (1638-1731), with skeletal dioramas desecrating the fleeting nature of life, was inherited by Enlightenment collectors such as the surgeon John Hunter (1728-1793), whose collection prominently contained both a “giant” and a “dwarf.”¹ To frame these displayed bodies as scientific rather than simply curious, nineteenth-century museums increasingly embraced curation, ordering their collections into careful schema that could convey information.
2. While anatomy museums may initially seem to reinforce an impression of what Carla Yanni calls “knowledge in the form of specimens,” (13) knowledge in the museum was not derived from the body alone, but articulated through an array of media. The specimens on the shelves were interpreted through panel descriptions, guidebooks, catalogues and lecture series; Elizabeth Hallam argues that “practices of anatomy, objects, images and texts refer to and reiterate, build upon and modify one another; they variously quote, echo, augment, answer, modify or work against one another over time” (17). Moreover, this process was mediated through a constellation of patients and anatomists, curators, collectors, and visitors. What Alberti and Hallam describe as “anatomical intermediality,” a “set of relations [...] enacted through material” (Alberti, *Morbid Curiosities* 7), was a challenge to the more narrowly defined ideal of scientific objectivity that was emerging alongside and attempting to establish itself through museums. While critics such as Alberti and Yanni have mainly discussed how scientific knowledge was constructed in the museum space, this article will consider how both the specimens in museums and the museum experience were constructed materially *and* textually, not solely through objects but through the use of literary techniques. Most keenly, museum, popular and literary texts register and explore

a conflict between the kinds of bodies associated with the anatomy museum—folkloric “giants”, dissected corpses potentially acquired by body snatchers, or the bodies of criminals—and the “scientific” anatomical museum. The myriad publications produced by anatomy museums foregrounded an ambition to make museums a scientific space, and the body a scientific subject through material and textual ordering. They intended to educate by placing objects in series so that they told a specific story, by taxonomising and cataloguing, lecturing and labeling, pinning knowledge to the body both in form and by text.

3. Examining the Hunterian’s own textual interpretations of its collections, particularly Richard Owen’s re-evaluation of the collections and subsequent catalogues, alongside the Hunterian’s representation in popular culture—specifically Frederick Knight Hunt’s articles for *Household Words*, “What there is in the Roof of the College of Surgeons” and “The Hunterian Museum”—reveals how the epistemological value of the anatomy museum was constructed not solely through its objects but through the use of literary techniques such as narration and the adoption of gothic imagery. I argue that museum catalogues such as Owen’s contributed to the ordering and educative principle of museums, negotiating anxieties about the bodies they contained by co-opting the imagery that troubled the museum (of fairytale monsters or snatched bodies). Knowledge can be created and disseminated through more literary narratives, reclaiming “giants” and “dwarves” as medical specimens. Journals such as *Household Words*, meanwhile, borrow the ordering principles of the museum to mediate perceptions of these sites as disorderly or cadaverous, presenting gothic narratives that function as enlightening museum tours, and fulfilling an educational as well as an entertaining purpose.

I. Legitimizing the Anatomy Museum

4. Victoria Carroll’s assertion that “text was becoming an increasingly important component of the museum visit during the first half of the nineteenth century, with the rise of the guidebook and the move toward fuller labelling of museum exhibits” conveys the growing “hermeneutic relationship between texts and museum objects” (280). The interpretative and intermedial nature of museum visits, in which “textually-based information was brought to bear on the objects on display” was the very reason that museums could claim these visits were “a learning experience” (280). This shift is demonstrated in Thomas Greenwood’s *Museums and Art Galleries* (1888), which conveys the increasing emphasis on the role museums played in cultivating scientific

interests, with three of the five “main objects of a Museum” placing education firmly at the forefront: “1st.—That it [the museum] provide rational amusement of an elevating character to the ordinary visitor,” “2nd.—That it be in the fullest sense an educational institution easily accessible to all classes” and “5th.—That it be one in a series of institutions whose objects shall be to further the education of the many, and the special studies of the few” (4-5). While this drive towards legitimizing the museum through foregrounding its moral and educative benefits is perhaps more visible in the later nineteenth century, it had been underway well before the mid-century. In his 1893 presidential address to the recently formed Museums Association, Sir William Henry Flower, who succeeded Owen first as curator of the Hunterian, and secondly as director of the British Museum of Natural History, notes that readers of museum literature would have observed a transition over the previous thirty years, from a straightforward emphasis on preserving natural and cultural objects, to an ideal of the museum as educative (21). Flower’s main arguments—regarding the importance of clear labelling and structured display, the separation of the museum space between public education and scientific research, and the central responsibility of the curator—draw together the roles of form, text and interpreter in the museum, evidencing a change in the culture of museums through their literature.

5. Anatomy museums in particular struggled due to the nature of the objects they displayed, their physical contents recalling the work of the body-snatchers, the threat of dissection after hanging, and the “exhibits” of freak shows and carnivals. The moral response to anatomy museums reinforced Flower’s arguments positioning the museum as a site of scientific education, with many collections (particularly those attached to medical schools) closing their doors to the public, strengthening the perception of body objects as inappropriate for public display and public viewing. As Kate Hill notes, “the combined effect of a tradition of attitudes to bodily objects coming into contact with new ideas about the dangers of body parts and their display created a difficult terrain for the collection and display of anything connected with the body” (157). Museums tried their best to navigate through this “difficult terrain” by means of the careful ordering and policing of displays, alongside the creation of a body of literature that made apparent their epistemology. By classifying “kinds of curiosity” as “either professional or prurient” (Benedict 249), the scientific and medical community carefully narrated their own professional body, categorizing the “legitimate” and “inappropriate” anatomy museum through an analysis of bodies and through their publications.

6. The medical and museum communities juxtaposed the material specimen with illustrations, photographs, and models, as well as labels, descriptions, lectures and catalogues that encouraged not just a viewing but a reading of the body. "Paper, wax and text formed a series of overlapping systems with the morbid body at their centre" in an attempt to "standardize the educational experience" (Alberti, *Morbid Curiosities* 4) (although, of course, visitor-readers drew myriad interpretations from the displays, problematizing ideals of scientific objectivity). This careful balance between physical and textual articulation in the museum space was also integral in the move away from the cabinets of curiosity, with their profusion of objects. The shift to displays that organized and labelled objects to illustrate scientific principles demonstrates a gradual distancing from "curiosity" as "a disreputable passion in workaday science" (Alberti, "The Museum Affect" 389; Daston and Park, *Wonder and the Order of Nature* 14-15). Institutions such as the freak show that did not conform to these exhibition tactics were slowly drained of their legitimacy (393), but even credible museums like the Hunterian were dogged by accounts articulated in the language of "curiosity" and "awe."

II. Rearticulating the Hunterian Museum

7. As Alberti has asserted, "medical museums were intended to be books of the body, clear and ordered" (*Morbid Curiosities* 177): neither the eye of the expert nor of the layperson were always qualified to derive meaning from the body alone. But the Hunterian Museum had a problem: Hunter had never completed a full list of its contents, let alone a catalogue. The burning of Hunter's documents by his brother-in-law, Sir Everard Home, exacerbated this issue. In the early nineteenth-century it was discovered that Home had in fact incorporated the content of Hunter's manuscripts into his own work, and then burnt them in an attempt to conceal this act of plagiarism, making the scientific relevance of Hunter's specimens even harder to comprehend. Indeed the epistemological worth of museums was so heavily reliant on the intermediality of books and bodies that when Home was discovered to have burned Hunter's manuscripts, Hunter's protégé William Clift broke down in tears, and claimed Home had but one thing left to do to annihilate Hunter's legacy "and that is to burn the collection itself" (qtd in Moore 532).
8. It was the Hunterian's curator Richard Owen who reconstructed the museum's full value from the smouldering ashes of Hunter's destroyed papers. Owen's appointment is a strong indicator of the role of text as reinforcing the educational purpose of the anatomy museum, for, as Owen

himself expressed to the surgeon William Blizard, a set of high quality catalogues “would help legitimize the museum’s claims that its contents were comparable to national collections of comparative anatomy on the European mainland” (Rupke 16). Meanwhile the council of the Royal College of Surgeons prepared the library for opening to members, with admission beginning in 1828 (Desmond 243). Home’s destruction of approximately nine to ten folio volumes and thirty papers, around nine-tenths of the manuscripts, meant that Hunter’s specimens, “having been shorn of their accompanying notes, had to be redescribed by Owen” (Desmond 248), a literary record that, like the ordering of the specimens in the museum space, transformed three-dimensional objects into legible epistemologies. While the contents of Hunter’s papers could no longer be reflected with certainty in the catalogue, by “reworking the old material” (248), Owen could fit the pieces of this anatomical puzzle into a new narrative structure. Moreover, Surgeon George James Guthrie asserted that in doing so, Owen had made scientific advances, as “Owen’s proof of the nonlarval nature of the college’s bottled *Proteus*,” a permanently-gilled cave-dwelling amphibian specimen that Cuvier had travelled expressly to see, demonstrated an “accuracy which gave the catalogs their scientific worth” (248),-- which also signalled that Owen’s ability extended beyond correlating specimens with Hunter’s original ideas, to the discovery and dissemination of new scientific information.

9. The utility of combining specimen and text to advance scientific knowledge is amply demonstrated in Owen’s authoring of the Hunterian catalogues. Thomas Hosmer Shepherd’s 1842 illustration of the refurbished Hunterian Museum illustrates the importance of narrating the specimen in the museum space.

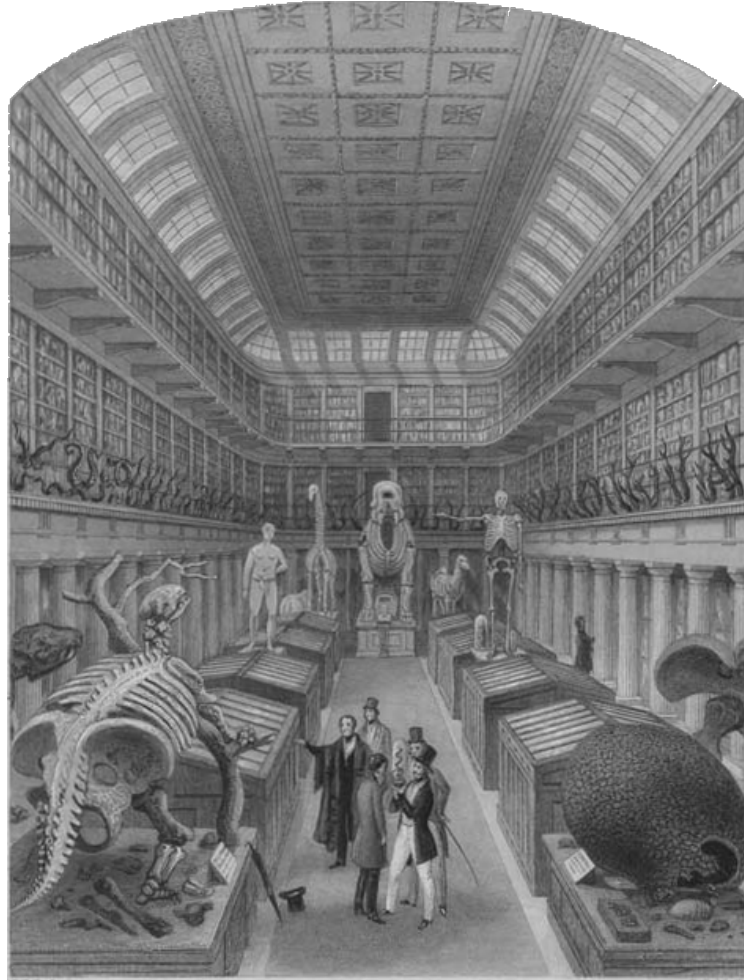


Figure 1: Thomas Hosmer Shepherd, ‘The Hunterian Museum’ (c.1842). Held in the Royal College of Surgeons, RSSC/P 318

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hunterian_Museum_London_1842.png

Shepherd’s image portrays Owen guiding a small group of visitors around the newly reopened galleries. It is Owen’s narration of the recently acquired Mylodon and Glypton skeletons that directs the gaze of the surrounding figures, focusing their attention on scientifically important discoveries. The skeletal specimens exhibited in the rest of the illustration remain shadowy without Owen’s defining narration, while the remains of the giant Charles Byrne mirror Owen’s gesture, imaging the curator’s power to shape meaning through the bodies in the museum. A slightly later image of these same galleries *without* Owen’s illuminating presence, in an 1845 edition of the *Illustrated London News*, provides a striking counterpoint; without Owen’s narration, all the specimens are thrown into equal relief, and the crowd swarms about the museum without closely observing its contents.

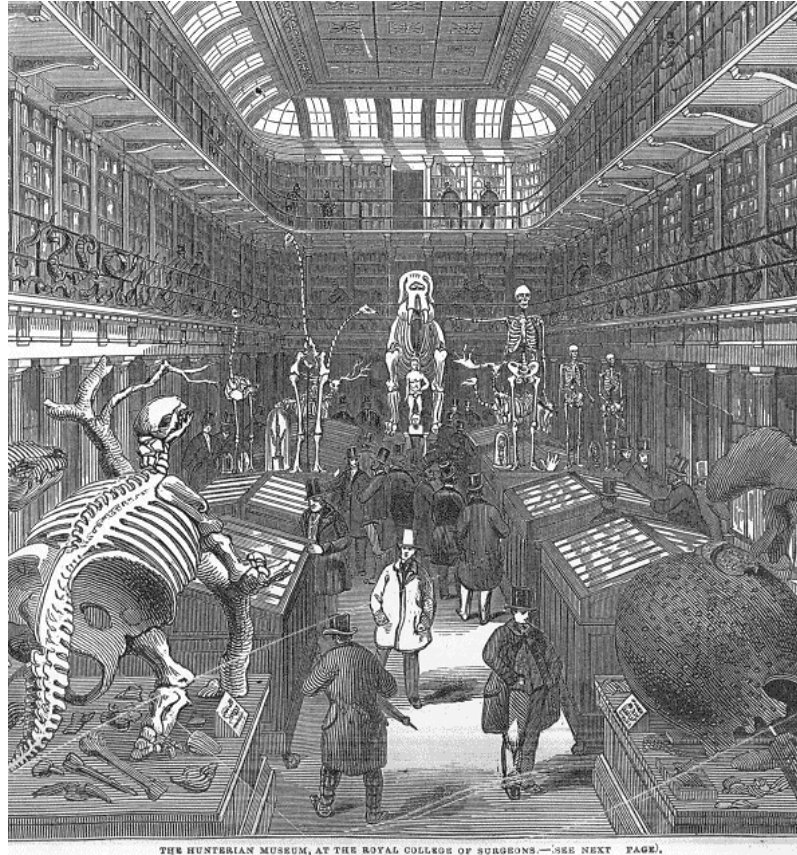


Figure 2: Anon, ‘The Hunterian Museum, at the Royal College of Surgeons’, *Illustrated London News*, 1845. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hunterian_Museum.gif

III. Close-reading the catalogues of the Hunterian Museum

10. The co-constitution of texts and museum objects is borne out in the process of composition used to compile the Hunterian catalogues. The preface to this series of catalogues evinces the dividing line between cabinets of curiosity and museums, with the catalogue carefully foregrounding the scientific ordering of the museum space, and using text to render objects more legible. Owen’s catalogues reconstruct Hunter’s collection by piecing together information from Hunter’s manuscripts. Owen declares that Hunter’s “collection of Monstrosities had enabled him [Hunter] to commence a classification of them; and it appears from a manuscript note, in the remaining Hunterian records, that he had advanced to the enunciation of at least one of the laws which regulate these productions” (*Descriptive and illustrated catalogue* Vol. I, iv). In this instance, while the anatomical specimens are rendered in language that was beginning to be associated with the sensational and the gothic, the “Monstrosities” are saved from associations of cluttered cabinets of curiosity through Hunter’s ordering, and prove scientifically useful as the material

from which Hunter could deduce new natural laws. An extensive quotation from an evidentiary piece of manuscript is inserted as a footnote on the same page as the claim about Hunter’s articulation of new laws, with Hunter’s own text used to reveal these previously undisclosed biological principles. The work required to create the catalogue thus reflects anatomical practices, for the lack of Hunter’s own manuscript necessitates “a patient comparison of [the specimens] with existing descriptions, and, in the case of the specimens of comparative anatomy, with the results of repeated dissections” (Preface, *Physiological Series* Vol. 1, v-vi). The lack of manuscript notes requires further specimens to be dissected to interpret their meaning, in order for text to be written for the existing specimens. In this instance, unlike Alberti’s suggestion that catalogue text is contingent on material specimen, the Hunterian catalogues are truly in dialogue with the museum’s objects. The catalogue is constituted by Hunter’s intellectual and material interpretation, for Hunter’s “principles of arrangement will continue to be adopted wherever they are laid down” (vi), while the manuscripts are used to speak for the material collection and the knowledge it was intended to disseminate.

11. While ostensibly included to enhance the use of the specimen, little critical attention appears to have been paid to the fact that anatomy museums employ literary techniques to expand on the subjective life of the person before they were a specimen, rather than limit themselves to the object’s pathology. The catalogues of the Hunterian may have been written to augment the value of the specimens to scientific study, but a number of case studies merge anatomical observation with details that are more “stories” than “case histories.” The catalogue entry for one of the Hunterian’s best known specimens, the skeleton of Charles Byrne, “the Irish Giant,” bears out the hybridity of these representations:

Catalogue: Osteological Division. Genus Homo. 1. The skeleton of Charles Byrne, known by the name of O’Brien, the Irish Giant. The following record of his death is extracted from the Annual Register Chronicle, June 1783. Vol. XXVI. P.209. “In Cockspur Street, Charing Cross, aged only 22, Mr. Charles Byrne, the famous Irish Giant, whose death is said to have been precipitated by excessive drinking, to which he was always addicted, but more particularly since his late loss of almost all his property, which he had simply invested in a single Bank note of £700. Our philosophical readers may not be displeased to know, on the credit of an ingenious correspondent who had opportunity of informing himself, that Mr. Byrne, in August 1780, measured eight feet; that in 1782 he had gained two inches; and after he was dead, he measured eight feet

four inches. Neither his father, mother, brother, nor any other person of his family, was of an extraordinary size.” It has been said, that in the last moments he expressed an earnest desire that his ponderous remains might be sunk out at sea; but if such were his wish, it was never fulfilled, as Mr. Hunter obtained his body before interment of any kind had taken place. *Hunterian*. (Owen, *Catalogue of the contents of the Museum* 3)

The close attention to details such as measurement, age, and contributing factors to his death are appropriately included in the catalogue entry. Yet the catalogue represents Byrne’s pathology in wondrous language, his hybridity constituted between the medical, the monstrous and the very human.

12. While the majority of these details are not anatomically derived, nor immediately pathologically relevant, the imaginative rearticulation of Byrne’s past life provides a context through which he might be understood as both subject and object. A scientific analysis of the cause of death is also a story of a story: the locality and age at death are included, but Byrne’s death is “said to have been” caused by drinking, supplemented by the charming naivety of investing his wealth in a single £700 note. A scientific voice and technical language are side-lined, and instead, text is excised from one source (a newspaper) and inserted into another (a catalogue). Information is re-articulated from various stories into clues that inform interpretation and diagnosis: Byrne apparently died of alcoholism; there are verifiable facts, such as his height; gigantism does not appear to have run in his family. The curious details of Byrne’s death are reinterpreted to constitute medically relevant knowledge.

13. The catalogue also emulates the positioning of specimens throughout the museum in a number of places, as with the entry on “the skeleton of Maddie Crachami, the Sicilian Dwarf” positioned near the entry on Byrne for comparative study, reflecting the comparative arrangement of their skeletons in the *Hunterian* (Owen, *Catalogue* 4). The entry about Caroline Crachami combines information from text and specimen, on object and subject, to best construct and disseminate medically useful knowledge. The “following account connected with this extraordinary skeleton, extracted from the fifth volume or supplement to the ‘Lectures on Comparative Anatomy,’ by Sir E. Home” demonstrates layers of narrative ‘connected’ to the specimen (Owen, *Catalogue* 5). Home lectures “on” the skeleton to expand upon its potential meanings for his students, and the lecture is itself stitched into the entry on Crachami’s skeleton in the *Hunterian* catalogue, a textually rendered demonstration of the intermedial museum specimen:

An Italian woman, twenty years of age, when by her reckoning three months gone with her third child was travelling in a caravan with the baggage of Duke Wellington's army on the Continent. In the middle of the night, in a violent storm, when she was fast asleep, a monkey, that had been chained on the top of the caravan, in its fright found its way into it, and, as the warmest birth [sic] it could find, got under her loins. Half asleep, she put her hand down to scratch herself; but scratching the monkey, it bit her fingers, and threw her into fits. She did not miscarry, but went her full time. The child when born only weighed one pound, and measured seven inches in length. It was reared with difficulty, and was carried by its parents to Ireland, where it became consumptive; it was brought to London, and shewn as a curiosity: it died just after it completed its ninth year. I saw it several times while alive, and it came into my possession after death. (Owen, *Catalogue* 5).

As with the catalogue entry on Charles Byrne, the description of Crachami combines medical terms with folkloric stories, although unlike the most overtly fairytale elements of Byrne's catalogue entry, which were cut from a newspaper article, those in Crachami's description derive from Home's "Lectures on Comparative Anatomy." Crachami's physical difference is described as a hybrid state embodying both human and animal attributes. The transposition of "birth" for "berth" linguistically connects the monkey's actions with the child's development, with both monkey and child referred to as a less-than-human "it". The repetition of "it" places the child-as-subject into the position of the object lectured on by Home, as his narration attempts to reclaim Crachami's body from "curiosity" to medical specimen. Crachami's development is reassessed in medical language, with Home using the tale of the monkey to interpret morbid signs present in the body, noting "as the child had never made water freely from its birth, the bladder probably had been injured at the time the monkey alarmed the mother." The catalogue's narration of Home's findings adds a further layer of interpretation, considering that "the distention of the bladder with urine, mentioned by Sir E. Home, might have been consequent upon the irritation of a large blister that had been applied nearly over the whole of the abdomen" (Owen, *Catalogue* 6). The synthesising of stories and anatomical lectures, and their insertion into catalogue entries, animates the objects and rounds out the representation of bodily pathology, with narration forming a more memorable specimen. The use of story-telling fulfils the function of a case history, playing a valuable role in making the anatomy museum respectable through education.

IV. The Hunterian in the Popular Imagination

14. The use of text to reinforce the value of a specimen was not only used in scientific publications, however, with popular culture also adopting the techniques used in the anatomy museum to navigate the tensions between the respectable and the sensational. The articles written for Charles Dickens's popular periodical *Household Words* by surgeon Frederick Knight Hunt, titled "The Hunterian" and "What there is in the Roof of the College of Surgeons," confirm the importance of narrative to enable the visitor-reader to interpret the anatomy museum. Hunt's pieces reflect and adopt the importance of narrative to enable the visitor-reader to correctly interpret the anatomy museum. *Household Words* was a vehicle for some of the period's most popular literature, positioning museum articles alongside some of the period's most canonical novels. Like anatomy museums, the publication of magazines, newspapers and journals experienced growth just after the mid-century, with the two formats both ostensibly developing to supply an educative need (Wynne 16). Gowan Dawson has convincingly demonstrated significant traffic between the thought processes and techniques employed by both serialized publications, and comparative anatomists such as the Hunterian's curator, Richard Owen (Dawson 13-14).² Unlike serialized novels, Hunt's articles are individual pieces, more akin to catalogue entries positioned within the larger composite of *Household Words*. These 'snapshots' of the Hunterian replicate single visits, with the publication of two articles within the same year reflecting the kind of return visits potentially undertaken by a member of the public. Just as the serialized novel might have provided insight into the personal lives of characters and homes, Hunt's articles provided an accessible glimpse of the contents of the Royal College of Surgeons, encouraging interest in (and visits to) the College's museum. The imagery that haunts the anatomy museum is appropriated by Hunt's articles to recreate the wonder of experiencing the Hunterian's objects, while curating them through narrative into an ordered museum experience.
15. Reflecting rising anxieties of the mid-century, Hunt's article "The Hunterian Museum," published in 1850, balances a Gothicised narration of the museum's contents with an emphasis on its educational mission, negotiating these tensions through a descriptive "walk amidst an abundant harvest yielded by death to teach the lesson of how life continues" (278). The visitor may "witness here the revelations of the dissecting-room," but they are "startled by none of its grossness or its taints," as the dirty cadavers transformed into "a regiment of skeletons and an army of bottles" by curatorial mediation and ordering, which exhibits "hundreds of skeletons; but not one horror"

(278-79). Similarly, the gothic “relics of huge monsters” are transformed by the museum’s ordering principles and taxonomy into the zoological discoveries of the “cameleopard,” “hippopotamus” and “Dinornis” (278-79).

16. Hunter’s appropriation of body matter repeatedly resurfaces throughout the article, materializing in so “remarkable a specimen” as “the Irish giant, O’Byrne.” The “extraordinary exertions” undertaken to “secure [Byrne’s] skeleton” and add it to Hunter’s collection are portrayed as a pioneering rescue that preserves a rarity from being “utterly lost,” instead of the more sensational story of Hunter’s appropriation of Byrne’s skeleton against the giant’s wishes. The lines between scientific museum and cabinet of curiosity remain contentious, however, with the display of Caroline Crachami, the “Sicilian Dwarf,” recalling descriptions of memento mori:

the man who put up her skeleton had evidently a dash of the satirist in his composition; for at the foot of the tiny bony frame lies a silk stocking that once clothed the dwarfs leg, and a little ring filled with pearls, and a ruby that once encircled her finger. The glitter of the gew-gaws is a silent commentary on the vanities once allied to the dry bones they now lie beside—vanities not limited to poor dwarfs. (Hunt, “The Hunterian Museum” 280)

The language of Hunt’s *Household Words* article constantly refers to “curious freaks of nature,” yet despite the sensationalized descriptions, the explicit attaching of stories to specimens is educative. These descriptions make the specimens vivid, just as Owen’s narration apparently illuminates the specimens he describes in Thomas Hosmer Shepherd’s illustration, above—and this mirrors the process of cataloguing, in which appending case histories to specimens increases their educational value. The article incorporates intermedial techniques to draw the worth of particular specimens to the attention of the reader. The narrative functions as a tour, guiding the reader through the layout of the museum’s interior, to “a small additional room on the left of the hall” in which one specimen, “the child with two skulls,” is specifically “mentioned.” The narration provides further detail—“it is the skeleton of a boy born in Bengal, about seventy years ago”—but immediately refers to “the description from the catalogue” (“The Hunterian Museum” 281), replicating the visitor’s ability to turn from one form of media to another to understand the body-object. The case history of this specimen is cut and quoted directly from the catalogue and stitched into the main body of the article, detailing the child’s symptoms, anatomy and pathology, emulating both the visitor’s intermedial experience of the individual object, and, in the placement of this catalogue entry in the larger body of the article, the importance of anatomy museums as

spaces in which medical men could connect up a specimen to larger theories of pathology. “The Hunterian Museum” effectively fulfils the objectives laid out in Thomas Greenwood’s *Museums and Galleries*, to make rational amusement and education widely available as a leisure activity.

17. Published earlier the same year, 1850, Hunt’s other article for *Household Words*—“What there is in the Roof of the College of Surgeons”—functions even more explicitly as a museum tour. The opening paragraph recreates a peripatetic journey in which the reader “experiences” the museum through the perspective of the narrator-visitor, as he “passes under [the museum’s] handsome portico, up the steps and enters its heavy mahogany and plate-glass doors [to] find himself in a large hall” (“What there is” 464). The medical students are paralleled to the pathological bodies within as they attend the “prescribed lectures” and, like patients, “submit to the examinations” required of them; their examiners “*operate upon sweating*” students (italics in original) preparing both the doctors-in-training and the reader for the bodies ahead (464). Both the space and student body of the Royal College of Surgeons are in play with the museum’s contents, with the library anatomized, its “excellent proportions” carefully taken and its parts catalogued and recorded, and the visitor is able to “see a live surgeon framed and glazed” within, like a specimen (464). The intermediality in an institution designed to further medical knowledge is emphasized through the role of words to circulate information, with the surgeons keeping up “the tide of gossip” and equal attention paid to the library walls, which are “lined with books, telling in various languages about all kinds of maladies and all sorts of plans for cure” (464).
18. The narration also performs a transition from the outmoded cabinets of curiosity to ordered museum space, mediating the tensions surrounding the bodies displayed in the anatomical museum:

On the walls tier after tier of bottles are ranged, till the eye following them up towards the top of the building, fatigued by their innumerable abundance, and the variety of their contents, again seeks the ground and its tables, there to encounter an almost equal crowd of curious things collected from the earth, the air, and the sea, to show how infinite the varieties in which Nature indulges, and how almost more than infinite the curious ways in which life varies the tenement it inhabits. But with this multiplicity of things we see no confusion, or trace of carelessness or poverty. All is neatness, order, and repose. Not a particle of dirt offends the eye; not a film of dust dims the brilliancy of the regiments of bottles drawn up in long files upon the shelves, to salute the visitor.

This place is a very drawing-room of science, all polished and set forth in trim order for the reception of the public. It is the best room in the house kept for the display of *the results* of the labours of the physiologist, a spot devoted to the revelations of anatomy, without the horrifying accompaniments of the dissecting-room. (464) (italics in original)

The narrative evokes the “curious[ity]” and “abundance” of the *wunderkammer* through the “variety” of these collected crowds, yet in these many objects, “all is neatness, order, and repose,” bottles “regiment[ed]” for the viewer’s benefit as they “salute the visitor.” The delineation between the clinical order of the museums and the disorder of the dissecting room is barely maintained, however, as the italicization of “*the results*,” embodies the absence of the “horrifying accompaniments of the dissecting-room.” The narrative prepares a transition from the “public portions of the College of Surgeons” and the “curious things it contains,” to suggest that one “wonder also where the things all came from”: “such a question” to officials would “likely obtain a very vague and misty reply,” yet a “glance behind the scenes,” facilitated through this article, can “afford an ample and curious explanation” (465).

19. The tour’s progression from “the handsome rooms, with their clear light, and polish, and air of neatness,” to “unshown recesses,” where “the only companions of our elevation [are] neighbouring church-spires,” forms a transition, described in the language of anatomical dissection, from the light of the museum’s ordered knowledge back into unenlightened darkness, symbolized through traditionally superstitious and Gothic imagery (465). The space also manifests the tensions in representing supposedly objective scientific information through textual interpretation. Hunt uses explicitly literary citations, comparing the visitor’s position in this Gothic landscape to “Fatima in Bluebeard’s Tower, impelled by an overbearing curiosity,” menacingly evoking widely shared anxieties about the legitimacy of institutions perceived as a step away from *wunderkammer* and body-snatching:

The walls all round are crowded with shelves, covered with bottles of various sizes full of the queerest-looking of all things. Many are of a bright vermilion colour; others yellow; others brown; others black; whilst others again display the opaque whiteness of bloodless death (465).

The reference to Bluebeard is enhanced through the narrator’s discovery of these dismembered bodies, the bottles “queer” rather than “regimented.” The description conjures an overcrowded assemblage of “tall jars, cans, a large glass case full of water-newts, hydras, and mosses” and “a

long coil of snake’s eggs [...], ears of diseased wheat, [...] part of a leaf of the gigantic water-lily” alongside “a thousand other odds and ends” while “a portion of a vegetable marrow is macerating in a saucer to separate some peculiar vessels for exhibition under the microscope” (465). As with the transition between public museum and a gothic revelation of the body object—much like the representation of the giant Byrne in the Hunterian’s catalogues—the atmosphere of the dissection room is hybrid, composed partly of objects traditionally associated with the supernatural—newts, hydras, snake eggs—and partly the instruments of scientific discovery—the microscopic objects, instruments and jars.

20. Hunt uses the techniques employed by the anatomy museum, of narrative and material ordering, to begin to reclaim the space for science; the narrator’s description composes a “catalogue of the chief contents of the apartment,” which on “closer inspection” manifests “little or no confusion, and the real meaning of the place” (465). As with Owen’s catalogues, the article also advocates the use of narrative to reveal the worth of specific objects to the visitor and to show how “every particle in every bottle that looks perhaps to the uninitiated eye only a mass of bad fish preserved in worse pickle, has its value” (465). The reader’s initiation into this space through a gothic tangle of objects indicates at first an uninitiated gaze of horror, while the narration reclaims the museum as a space of scientific knowledge, ultimately drawing attention to and validating the role narration itself plays in this process, as “the last contribution to the series of Catalogues was made in the room we have been examining.” Although “to the common eye and common idea, all bone is simply bone” and to “common purposes the word indicates closely enough what the speaker would describe,” this is “not so to the naturalist and the physiologist” who employed their “scalpel and microscope” to reveal in the catalogue “exact particulars of many facts never before noticed” (466). It is the catalogue rather than the specimen that highlights “facts,” with knowledge constituted in the combination of attention to material detail and careful description of it.
21. Scientists and curators such as John Hunter and Richard Owen borrowed literary techniques to narrate their specimens, to enhance the knowledge that visitors ranging from the lay public to the medical student could draw from them, resulting in lectures, tours, and catalogues. These intermedial methods were adopted by other less-reputable institutions as medical journals such as *The Lancet* increasingly attacked their propriety (Kahn’s Anatomical and Pathological Museum, for example, published ephemera that simultaneously foregrounded the educational purpose of its collections while also serving as an advert for the more salacious exhibits that

focussed on sexual disease). Popular literary representations of the Hunterian deployed the narrative techniques at play in the museum space, creating narratives which functioned as tours, illuminating the museum's collections and its individual specimens to inform, educate and amuse their readers. Authors such as Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins increasingly incorporated anatomical imagery into their fiction, carefully representing the bodies displayed in their pages as a means by which the reader could contemplate a character's criminal nature. The educational and sensational were particularly hard to separate when it came to the human body, but the synthesis of material object and textual interpretation allowed anatomy collections to become more than the sum of their parts. Narrative techniques had the potential to transform them from morbid cabinets of curiosities associated with the activities of body-snatchers, into institutions that could house medical "monsters," yet still embody the educational ideals of the modern museum.

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¹ Alberti notes that cabinets of curiosities “had strengths in particular areas, including the categories we would now group within medical museums. Apothecaries were among the most prolific early modern collectors, who used their cabinets for clinical or research purposes, and teachers at the Dutch and Italian medical schools displayed their cabinets in anatomical theatres. From the turn of the seventeenth century, as dissection became more prevalent in Western Europe, they were joined by an increasing number of collections dedicated to anatomy gathered by anatomists and surgeons, and over the course of the eighteenth century anatomy collections proliferated as a distinct museological enterprise” (*Morbid Curiosities* 14).

² Dawson's argument reveals how "Owen's own enthusiastic reading of the monthly numbers of Charles Dickens's serial novels, in which he endeavoured to anticipate details of the plot by predicting the relation of the part to a larger narrative whole, closely paralleled his inferences from only single bones, and sheds important new light on his paleontological procedures" (13-14).