

Wisconsin Undergraduates Share the RBC's Tale of Sweeney Todd



Photo: the 2017-8 editorial team. L-R: UWGB students Faith Klick, Heather Matchefts, Sara Ladwig, Emma Ferron, Marisa Slemptes, Miriam Laird, Erica Sorenson, Maria Lemens, Kyle Pech-Kortbein, and Beth Siltala. Photo by Rebecca Nesvet.

In December 2014, the Internet Archive uploaded a rare treasure: a digital facsimile of an extremely rare treasure: the University of North Carolina, Chaoel Hill, Rare Books Collection's copy of James Malcolm Rymer's *The String of Pearls, or the Barber of Fleet-street, A Domestic Romance*—the longest and final edition of this original source of the urban legend of the homicidal barber Sweeney Todd.

The bound volume consists of a complete run of individually-published parts of that “penny blood,” or Victorian fiction serial targeting working-class family readers. Only two such copies exist. The other one, in the Barry Ono Collection at the British Library and is not entirely identical to the UNC copy. At the open-access Internet Archive, anyone with internet access can read *The String of Pearls*.

This is an important text in the British reaction to the industrial revolution. In *The String of Pearls*, Todd's accomplice Mrs. Lovett hires a succession of frighteningly disposable workers to operate her subterranean “pie manufactory” (58). The archaic term emphasizes that it's a factory, not a bakery, not even an industrial kitchen. The workers are warm, housed, and fed, but without any company,

dialogue, art, science, or other kind of humanistic solace, they “contemplate... suicide” (241).

However, it is not the most accessible Victorian novel. There is no critical edition of the 1850-1 text, nor any edition of that text published since 1850. This is problematic because the penny parts are riddled not only with references to a culture that no longer exists, but with a great many typesetting errors, probably due to its publisher Edward Lloyd’s frenetic publication pace. Moreover, the interface of the Internet Archive doesn’t easily facilitate twenty-first century popular reading—that is, reading on a phone.

To solve these problems and make the story of Sweeney Todd accessible to a new generation of readers, upper-level undergraduate students of English and Digital Humanities at the University of Wisconsin, Green Bay (UWGB), have been creating [a digital documentary edition of *The String of Pearls*](#). Since 2015, these students and UNC alumna Rebecca Nesvet, Assistant Professor of English at UWGB have been correcting the Internet Archive’s OCR-generated transcription of the UNC copy, encoding the resulting transcription in XML in accordance with the Text Encoding Initiative (TEI) Guidelines, and annotating the text with contextualizing notes (and corrections of the original typos.) XSLT and CSS was written by student editors Sarah Miles and Matt McAnelly. In 2016-7, UWGB student (now alumnus) Matt McAnelly designed a Graphical User Interface (GUI) intended to make the edition legible on a phone and student graphic designer Angela Collier provided the project with a logo. By January 2018, the team has produced a very rough draft of the first sixty chapters. This spring, we will receive feedback from external peer reviewers: undergraduates at Babson University, taught by Prof. Kellie Donovan-Condron.

Still to come: proofreading of most of the existing chapters, additional chapters and notes, web development for improved accessibility and nonlinear reading, a bibliography and a searchable gallery of illustrations, displayed in a carousel.

To “attend the tale of Sweeney Todd” (as Stephen Sondheim advised in his 1979 musical adaptation,” you can start with Nesvet’s [General Introduction](#), then read the main text chapter-by-chapter. Alternately, consult the [Chapter Synopses](#) to find the most exciting bits of the long-running serial.

Rebecca Nesvet