A Poisoning of No Substance: The Trials of Medico-Legal Proof in Mid-Victorian England

Ian A. Burney

“I am innocent of poisoning Cook by strychnine.” With these words, Dr. William Palmer went to the scaffold, convicted of having perpetrated precisely the crime he denied to the last. Palmer’s twelve-day trial in May 1856, among the most celebrated English murder cases of the century, had received massive press attention, and his execution was no less scrutinized. Scaffold speeches being traditional opportunities for achieving closure on a case (preferably, though not exclusively, by confession and repentance), press reports devoted a good deal of space to the concerted efforts made to convince Palmer to comply with these expectations: “From the time of his sentence to the very moment when he ascended the scaffold,” one correspondent observed, “Palmer was persuaded, entreated, implored day by day, almost hour by hour, to confess his crimes, not to God, but to man.”

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“The Trial and Execution of William Palmer,” Journal of Mental Science 2 (1856): 513. Though not Palmer’s last reported words, this was the statement that most press reports represented as his final declaration. Within twelve months of its conclusion, Palmer’s trial and execution had been made the subject of over twenty published tracts, and soon thereafter became a common referent not only in medico-legal treatises but also in standard legal works such as the fourth edition of William Wills’s Essay on the Principles of Circumstantial Evidence (London, 1862), and James Fitzjames Stephen’s History of the Criminal Law in England (London, 1883). Michael Harris provides an excellent account of the Palmer coverage in “Social Diseases? Crime and Medicine in the Victorian Press,” in Medical Journals and Medical Knowledge, ed. W. F. Bynum, Stephen Lock, and Roy Porter (London and New York, 1992), pp. 108–25. For perspectives on the genre of scaffold speeches, see Michel Foucault, Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison.

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Interrogated to the last, Palmer offered instead of closure a riddle, neither directly denying his guilt nor ratifying the grounds upon which his conviction rested. In doing so he seemed to take aim at the most contentious part of the trial, namely, the scientific evidence that had attributed the death of John Parsons Cook to strychnine poisoning. By disavowing strychnine as the agent of Cook’s death, he at once repudiated the prosecution’s fundamental contention and left open the possibility that, although he had been justly condemned as a murderer, his conviction was based on fallacious medico-legal grounds.

Palmer’s dying words became the subject of widespread concern. The *Examiner*, for one, “regretted that endeavours were made to extort confession, for the assumption should always be that the crime has been proved beyond a doubt by the process of law . . . To solicit it is to imply that the verdict of guilty wants verification.” Professional journals voiced similar reservations: the *Journal of Mental Science*, though sympathetic to its underlying motivation, criticized the unseemly rush to supplement legal pronouncement: “Doubtless, it would be consolatory to judges and jurymen that all murderers should confess before execution. But if sentence has been passed, after that amount of demonstrative proof which alone can justify the extreme sentence of the law, judges and jury ought to be satisfied with the conviction that they have done their duty.”

“‘To crave for confession as a necessary justification to the conscience,’” the *Journal* continued, “‘is an unmanly and sentimental weakness.’”

Given the complexities of the case, however, such weakness might be expected, and in the opinion of the *Journal* this was precisely the “prejudicial” effect that Palmer had left upon the “public mind.”

But Palmer’s declaration cast a longer shadow, for, as the *Association Medical Journal* made clear, it was not just a credulous public that had sought confirmation in the scaffold’s promise of clarity and truth. Science, it feared, would also suffer from Palmer’s defiance: “The few words that the wretched criminal uttered before proceeding to the scaffold, instead of clearing up the difficulties which have beset the minds of many medical men, will only tend to still further perplex

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2 Nor did the interrogation stop there: a phrenological examination, reported in the *Leader*, found that “the worst part of his conformation was his head. The animal organs were excessively large . . . It was physically impossible for him to have been a good man” (“The Execution of William Palmer,” *Leader* 7 [21 June 1856]: 583).


them."\(^5\) The proper response to this very real dilemma, the *Association Medical Journal* concluded, was further and more intensive expert study.

Comments such as these, appearing in the journals most anxious to boost the stature of medical jurisprudence, come as something of a surprise. By casting Palmer’s words as a legitimate (if unwelcome) stimulus to further research, they called attention to the permeable boundary between public credulity and expert knowledge—that is, to the failures of the very boundary upon whose segregating operations claims to expertise ultimately depended. This was as clear an indication as any that the trial had been, and would in all probability continue to be, a singularly rich opportunity for debating the status of the mid-Victorian scientific witness.

This essay explores the historical impossibility of delineating a clear opposition between public and expert knowledge—impossible because medico-legal knowledge was (and is) not an isolated artifact of the laboratory and the courtroom. Its production and stabilization, instead, derive in significant ways from an engagement with the expectations of a differentiated audience, expectations that are themselves in part held by those designated as experts. The very existence of any claim to expertise, moreover, is contingent on the site within which it is articulated. From the standpoint of the mid-nineteenth-century law of evidence, for instance, an “expert” was the recognized (if contested) designation for a witness who was permitted to testify on the basis of second-hand knowledge.\(^6\) More ambitious (and often more tenuous) versions of expertise, by contrast, appeared in the numerous journal articles and textbooks on forensic medicine aiming to promote the emerging subdiscipline to a coming generation of practitioners and to the public at large.

These are issues that have been largely ignored, not only in accounts of the Palmer case itself (which, if they discuss the scientific evidence at all, have tended to venture no further than offering an assessment in light of modern knowledge and protocols of practice),\(^7\) but also in more


\(^6\) It is worth noting that “expertise” enters the English language as a neologism around midcentury, indicative of an historical specificity distinct from previous configurations of authoritative knowledge. See Roy MacLeod’s introduction to his edited collection, *Government and Expertise: Specialists, Administrators, and Professionals, 1860–1919* (Cambridge and New York, 1988).

broadly conceived projects to rehabilitate “true crime” for the purposes of historical analysis. Traditionally off-limits for academic historians, “true crime” has moved center stage in a number of recent social and cultural histories of modern Britain, notably Angus McLaren’s *Prescription for Murder* (1993) and Judith Walkowitz’s *City of Dreadful Delight* (1992). Though both works involve sensational murder cases (McLaren’s the 1892 poisoning trial of Dr. Thomas Neill Cream, Walkowitz’s the 1888 Jack the Ripper murders), their authors are at some pains to distance themselves from the imputation of writing “sensationalized” history. They do this by incorporating a historicized understanding of sensationalism into their respective analyses and by replacing the traditional fixtures of sensational narrative with a rigorous contextualization, one that points the analytical valence outward from the crime and positions the criminal, in McLaren’s phrasing, as a cultural “guide.”

This strategy doubtless provides a framework for innovative historical work, but it also entails analytical sacrifices, not the least of which is its tendency to obscure the workings of what might be called the culture of scientific proof—that is, the process through which expert evidence is generated, circulated, and understood. Moreover, displacing the case in favor of context does not in itself guarantee expository sobriety. McLaren’s opening words can illustrate both these points: “The most terrifying aspect of strychnine poisoning,” he informs his readers, “is that although the convulsions are terrible, you do not lose consciousness; in fact, the mental faculties are largely unimpaired until death ensues. You know that you are dying. The first symptoms are feelings of apprehension and terror followed by muscle stiffness, twitching of the face, and finally tetanic convulsions of the entire body. . . . Death occurs in one to three hours, the face fixed in a macabre grin and the body arched in hypertension.” Such “goulish” descriptions, McLaren laments, are necessarily at the center of his work, included not as sensational indulgences, but as unflinching gestures to the real.

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3 In his embrace of the cultural emblematics of the Cream case, for instance, McLaren treats the toxicological evidence as a virtual given. See, e.g., his account of Thomas Stevenson’s toxicological analysis and the list of outstanding questions he considers to be left open in its wake. McLaren, *A Prescription for Murder*, p. 31.

4 Ibid., p. xi.
Yet on closer inspection this apparently unmediated account of strychnine poisoning itself turns out to be a complex scientific and historical product. The source cited by McLaren (from which he more or less transcribes the symptomatology) is the 1883 edition of *The Principles and Practices of Medical Jurisprudence*, edited by Thomas Stevenson, the Home Office toxicologist who appeared as the lead expert witness for the Cream prosecution. The text’s principal author, however, was Stevenson’s late colleague at Guy’s Hospital, the celebrated medical jurist Alfred Swaine Taylor, and Stevenson’s symptomatology is but a slightly modified version of the one appearing in Taylor’s last edition. Taylor’s description of strychnine poisoning, moreover, had a rich history of its own. His evocation of the victim’s subjective state, the terrified sense of impending demise, the grotesque physiognomy in death, and even the telltale twitchings (that is, the constitutive elements of McLaren’s portrait of strychnine’s “goulish” realities) were altogether absent from his original textbook account in *On Poisons in Relation to Medical Jurisprudence* (1848), and were written into the symptomatology largely in response to a set of evidentiary details stemming from a subsequent case, namely, the 1856 trial of Dr. William Palmer.12

A related historiographical observation concerns the workings of closure in the Ripper case. Both McLaren and Walkowitz attribute the 1888 Whitechapel murders’ grip on the historical imagination in large part to the fact that they were never “solved.” Indeed, Walkowitz builds this into her framework for historicizing “true crime,” proposing the case’s departure from melodrama’s generic embrace of resolution as a key to its enduring legacy. The Ripper story, she observes, “achieved no closure,” entering into history without “a unified, stable narrative.” 13 The result, Walkowitz concludes, is that it remains suspended in a web of uncertainty, “an enigmatic thriller that continually reverberates and reconstructs itself over time.”14

In this essay I am also concerned with questions of instability and retelling, but with an important distinction: the instabilities presented by the Palmer case, its resistance to historical “closure,” do not derive from the absence of an authorized solution. Palmer was hanged and has entered posterity as an infamous poisoner, but this does not mean that his is an involvably unified story. If closure is considered as a provisional

14 Ibid., p. 201. McLaren begins and ends his study of Cream by explicit contrast to the unresolved status of the Ripper case (*A Prescription for Murder*, pp. xii, 143).
and contingent effect rather than an essential attribute, analysis of a “closed” case can equally (or, in going against the grain of ostensibly settled judgment, better) reveal the vicissitudes of authority and belief at work in constructing historically situated narratives.

Analysis of the case of William Palmer nicely illustrates these points. It poses a host of specific questions about the state of scientific expertise at midcentury and the difficulties involved in taking expert knowledge outside the spatial and conceptual contexts in which it was made. What, for instance, was the place of the medico-legal witness in courts of law and where did his testimony rank along differing contemporary hierarchies of proof? Could expertise sustain itself while at the same time laying bare the unwieldy (and ideally unarticulated) apparatus within which it was generated? These questions inevitably connect with central themes in the histories of medicine and law. Accordingly, the rise of medical professionalization and specialization, the institutionalization of scientific knowledge, the development of the law of evidence, and the role of traditional institutions like the jury in the context of emergent claims of expertise each form a part of the analytical backdrop for what follows. Finally, in considering scientific evidence as an important resource for constructing and contesting a range of meanings stemming from one mid-Victorian poisoning case, historical and historiographical concerns converge: for contemporary observers as for present-day analysts, it is as a lesson in the historically embedded travails of scientific fact-making that the trial of Palmer, “the Rugeley Poisoner,” is most compelling.

I

In 1855 William Palmer was thirty-four years of age and had spent nearly ten years as a licensed general practitioner in the Staffordshire town of Rugeley. Soon after establishing himself in Rugeley, he married Anne, the illegitimate daughter of a former East India official, Colonel Brooke. Brooke had died in 1834, leaving a substantial amount of property to Anne, on condition that it would revert to the Brooke family upon her death. Having no prospect of financial security should he outlive his bride, William Palmer insured Anne’s life, taking out three policies totaling £13,000. Anne died in September of 1854, shortly after returning home from a visit to Liverpool. Her symptoms during her last illness were reported by Palmer himself to William Bamford, her octogenarian medical attendant, as being consistent with cholera, which was at the time rife in Liverpool. On her death, Bamford duly certified
cholera as the cause, and Palmer had no difficulty collecting on his wife's policies.15

Yet by early 1855 Palmer was in financial distress, Anne's premiums having been insufficient to support him in his primary avocation as a gambler with a penchant for the racetrack. In August of that year, Palmer's notoriously dissipated brother, Walter, whose life William had (with some difficulty) also insured, died in a fit of apoplexy, according to the only medical man present at his death—his brother and sole beneficiary. Palmer's attempt to collect on Walter's policy, however, prompted an investigation by an insurance company agent.

The delay in payment came as Palmer's finances were becoming increasingly baroque, involving a complicated network of creditors, one of whom was his twenty-eight-year-old gambling associate, John Parsons Cook.16 In November 1855, Palmer accompanied Cook to the Shrewsbury racecourse, where, on the afternoon of the thirteenth, Cook won a sizable sum betting on his own horse, "Polestar." Cook collected only a portion of his stakes following the race; the remainder was to be paid within the week. That evening, after celebrating his victory with Palmer and others, Cook fell suddenly ill. He and Palmer returned to Rugeley shortly thereafter, where a restored Cook took up temporary residence at the Talbot Arms inn. On 16 November, after lunching with Palmer, Cook again took to his sickbed. He died on the night of 20 November, following an erratic pattern of physical distress that appeared to coincide with Dr. Palmer's ministrations.17

The circumstances of Cook's death roused the suspicions of his stepfather and executor, Mr. Stephens, who determined to procure a postmortem examination of the body. Four local doctors, Palmer included, were present at the postmortem on 26 November. According to the subsequent testimony of the other participants, Palmer seemed intent on disrupting the examination, at one point pushing into the lead investigator and causing some of the stomach contents to be spilled, at another moving a jar of viscera to a far corner of the room, after which two slits made with a sharp instrument were discovered on its

16 For a contemporary synopsis of Palmer's complex finances, see The Times editorial for 22 May 1856, p. 8. A file at the Public Record Office (HO45/6260) contains revealing documentation of Palmer's negotiations with various insurance companies.
The postmortem was completed nevertheless, and the extracted matter forwarded to London for analysis by the eminent Professor Alfred Swaine Taylor. The contents arrived (despite, as established in the subsequent trial, Palmer’s attempt to bribe the coach driver into staging an accident en route) accompanied by a note from Stephens informing Taylor of his suspicions of foul play.

Taylor and his colleague at Guy’s Hospital, Dr. Rees, concluded upon analysis that nothing in the appearance of the internal organs would account for death from natural causes. Tests for a wide range of poisons (including strychnine, sought because Stephens had learned that Palmer had recently purchased some, ostensibly as rat poison) yielded only a small amount of antimony, a commonly prescribed mineral compound that acted as an irritant to produce vomiting, but that, if given in repeated doses, could be fatal. In consulting Cook’s case history, however, Taylor and Rees could find no record of prescribed antimony.

In his initial evidence at the Cook inquest (held in the same Talbot Arms where Cook had expired) Taylor focused on the presence of antimony in the body, advising the jury that he and Rees had “no evidence before us to enable us to form a judgment as to the circumstances under which [antimony] was taken by or administered to the deceased, or to enable us to say in this case whether it was or was not the cause of death.” But the testimony of the next witness dramatically altered Taylor’s position. Elizabeth Mills, the chambermaid at the Talbot Arms who had ministered to Cook during his final illness, recounted Cook’s reaction to pills given by Palmer on the night prior to and the night of his death. Mills described Cook’s convulsive movements (which included beating his bed with his arms and legs, followed by a general stiffening of the limbs), the wild look about his eyes, and his agonized declarations that he was about to die. Taylor intervened at this point to inquire whether any external lacerations were found on the body that might have linked the convulsions to their most obvious explanation—an ordinary case of traumatic tetanus. Hearing that no such marks had been found, Taylor

18 See, e.g., the testimony of Dr. Harland at Palmer’s trial as reported in “The Rugeley Poisoning Case,” Medical Times and Gazette 19 (31 May 1856): 540.
20 In the trial, the presence of antimony was attributed to several nefarious designs: to weaken Cook so that he could not personally collect the remainder of his winnings; to simulate a slow decline by natural disease; and—more ingeniously still—to enhance the body’s capacity to absorb strychnine, thus allowing for the minutest amount to prove fatal.
announced that he was prepared to give a definite opinion as to the cause of death: “My belief is that he died from tetanus, and that tetanus was caused by medicine given to him shortly before his death.” The pills, Taylor continued, must have contained strychnine, the only substance to his knowledge capable of producing symptoms like those described. Cook had died in the throes of a tetanic convulsion, and in the absence of any natural cause, Taylor “had not the slightest hesitation” in identifying strychnine as the only credible alternative explanation.22

There was, Taylor conceded, one difficulty with this solution: he had found no strychnine in Cook’s body. Yet this admitted of a scientific explanation, Taylor insisted. Unlike metallic poisons that remained in the body and could be made the subject of unambiguous analytical demonstration, an organic substance like strychnine “was so speedily absorbed in the blood that in the course of an hour after the administration no chemical test at present known could detect it.” Despite a skeptical summation by the coroner, during which he recalled to the jury’s intelligence that no strychnine had been found, and that Taylor had come to his conclusions not on the basis of toxicological analysis but on a chambermaid’s description of Cook’s dying agonies, the jury returned a verdict “that the deceased died of poison, willfully administered to him by William Palmer.”23 Palmer was committed for trial on a coroner’s warrant.

II

In the four months between the Rugeley inquest and the trial of William Palmer for Cook’s murder, the case remained prominent in the public eye. National interest was intense, and local sentiment was so charged (“divided into Palmerites and Anti-Palmerites,” in the words of The Times) that the High Court, in a precedent-setting decision requiring confirmation by act of parliament, moved the trial venue from Staffordshire to the Old Bailey in a bid for an impartial jury.24 Attention to the Palmer case also fed into ongoing and intense discussions on the subject of poison. A spectrum of newspapers that stretched from the progressive Leader to the conservative Saturday Review maintained that England at midcentury was in the clutches of a “poisoning mania.”25 The news from

22 Ibid.
25 “Poisoning in England,” Saturday Review 2 (22 December 1855): 134–35. The Leader’s “Poisoner in the House” presented the threat as at once real, pervasive, and alarmingly present: “If you feel a deadly sensation within, and grow gradually weaker,”
Rugeley, of course, did nothing to mute the tone of such reports, and in early February of 1856, the popular Sunday magazine the *Illustrated Times* crowned the widespread expressions of alarm with a front-page headline declaring poisoning “The Crime of the Age.”

These immediate fears, voiced across the political and journalistic spectrum, resonated with a number of related public discussions, the most basic of which concerned the actual extent of homicidal poisoning. The consensus among acknowledged authorities was that mid-Victorian Britain was indeed facing a problem of unprecedented dimension. Editorials in the leading medical journals generally held this to be true, as did organizations such as the Coroners’ Society, which in the years prior to the Palmer case urged its members to be vigilant against the rising tide of secret poisoning. In 1848, Alfred Swaine Taylor justified the publication of the first edition of *On Poisons* with explicit reference to contemporary anxieties: “The crime of poisoning has been of late so fearlessly on the increase, that it seems essential for the proper administration of justice, and for the security of society, to collect and arrange in a convenient form for reference, those important medical facts in relation to death from poison.”

Against this backdrop, long-standing parliamentary debates about the need to regulate the sale of poisons (first raised in 1819) took on a decidedly more urgent tone. Outside Parliament, mortality statistics, published annually by the office of the Registrar General since 1839, offered another prominent opportunity for voicing official concern. Indeed, in the very first of these returns, William Farr (the head of the department’s statistical branch and a major figure in the public health movement in his own right) warned that gaps in the system of death registration concealed the true dimensions of the problem. A series of high profile outbreaks of poisonings in rural Norfolk (1846) and Essex (1846 and 1848) intensified concern. Officials like Farr attributed these

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it began, “how do you know that you are not poisoned? If your hands tingle, do you not fancy that it is arsenic? How can you be sure that it is not?” (Leader 6 [15 December 1855]: 1200).


27 Most vigorous of the main metropolitan medical journals was the *London Medical Gazette*, under Taylor’s editorship from 1845 to 1851. See, e.g., its series “On the Increase of Secret Poisoning,” in January and February 1847. Coroners’ discussions of the problem can be found in the *Coroners’ Society Annual Reports* for the years 1847, 1848, and 1851.


30 *British Parliamentary Papers (BPP)*, vol. 16 (1839), app. P, p. 75.
occurrences to the interference of local magistrates in the operation of coroners' inquests, a view echoed in Parliament by the Home Secretary himself.31 The Times concurred with the government's assessment, issuing frequent pleas for reform to counter the "alarming increase" in what it described as "a moral epidemic far more formidable than any plague which we are likely to see imported from the East."32

A self-conscious and profoundly historicized analysis, moreover, structured contemporary understanding of criminal poisoning at the symbolic level. In the first place, none of the reports warning of "panics" and "epidemics" considered criminal poisoning as a peculiarly nineteenth-century phenomenon. Having declared it the "Crime of the Age," for example, the Illustrated Times quickly conceded that "poisoning itself, considered simpliciter, is one of the oldest crimes in the world." Yet these accounts were equally insistent on the historical specificity of the problem they were describing. This was because they viewed poisoning as a phenomenon calibrated to a given society's level of "civiliza-

31 Hansard's Parliamentary Debates, 3d ser., 87 (June 1846): 375, comments of Sir James Graham. The specter of secret poisoning was in fact a central trope in the early efforts by Farr and others to improve the system of death registration, especially with respect to the role played by coroners. For this debate, see my forthcoming Bodies of Evidence: Medicine, Public Inquiry, and the Politics of the English Inquest, 1830–1926 (Baltimore, 1999). For a gender-centered analysis of these outbreaks, see George Robb's "Circe in Crinoline: Domestic Poisonings in Victorian England," Journal of Family History 22, no. 2 (April 1997): 176–90.

32 The Times (25 September 1847): 4; (22 September 1848): 4. Historians have been more cautious in assessing the statistical evidence for this "epidemic." Bartrop suggests that contemporary statistics are significant not so much as proof of a real epidemic but an indication of "how the incidence of poisoning was being represented to contemporary society" ("A Pennthur of Arsenic," p. 57). In this he joins historians such as Harris ("Social Diseases," p. 119), and Anne Crowther and Brenda White (On Soul and Conscience: The Medical Expert and Crime [Aberdeen, 1988], p. 19) in attributing the prominence given secret poisoning at midcentury to its peculiar symbolic resonance. This view gains further credence from a critical evaluation of criminal statistics published at the time, which were neither presented in readily accessible form nor conclusive when assembled. Taking the readily available figures on criminal trials, e.g., fewer than two cases per year between 1839 and 1849 (inclusive) were tried in England and Wales involving murder or attempted murder by poison. BPP, vol. 45 (1850), "Return of the Number of Persons, Male and Female, Tried in the United Kingdom for Murder and Attempted Murder, by the Administration of Poison, from 1839–1849." In 1849, of well over 20,000 inquests held, 415 deaths were registered as connected with poison, only eleven of which involved a charge of homicide (a rate of .0025 percent, which, though up from the .0014 percent rate of 1838–39 hardly constitutes a problem of compelling proportions). In 1856, the year of the Palmer trial, 432 of 22,221 inquests involved poison, of which only three ended in murder trials. The Registrar General’s Office calculated for this same year that twenty-three deaths per one million persons living were attributable to poison, and poison was the sixty-ninth most common cause of death out of 105 causes listed—well below every other form of violent and possibly homicidal death tabulated. BPP, vol. 23 (1857–58), "Seventeenth Annual Report of the Registrar General."
tion.” Poisoning was represented as “peculiarly the crime of civilization,” predicated on a synergistic relationship of knowledge, prosperity, and corruption. Recalling the example of ancient Rome, in which, as society became more refined, the dagger yielded to poison as the murderous agent of choice, the Illustrated Times proposed a generalizable historical rule for understanding the relationship between forms of violence and their social contexts: “In early days, violence is the characteristic of crime, as of everything else; in later days, craftiness or cunning.”

Within this historical schema, the mid-Victorian poisoner figured as a kind of apotheosis. Modern England, according to stock analysis, had attained a level of civilization unique unto itself and had produced a correspondingly unique criminal poisoner. The prosperity of this quintessentially liberal bourgeois society derived from a disciplined collection of calculating individuals who acted upon one another in vast, anonymous networks of exchange. Anonymity, mediated action, and disciplined refinement were also the attributes most readily identified with poison as an instrument of crime. Unlike outmoded weapons of physical force, which required a direct confrontation between murderer and victim, poison could do its work at a remove. Mediated violence likewise characterized the nature and actions of poison. As poison was thought to leave no marks directly accessible to the eye, its victims could be construed as characteristically “modern” in presenting to the world an inscrutable facade masking an inner reality. Poison was furthermore classed as the appropriate agent of a prosaic sensibility for which primal motives like passion or revenge had been displaced by market discipline.

As a correlative, according to contemporary accounts, the poisoner’s target was transformed through market forces, most notably by the form of associative individualism underwritten by the active trade in life insurance. In the unremarkable lives of the insured, the Illustrated Times lamented, “the floating capital of criminality has found a new investment.” Where once “only individuals of some eminence were in some danger,” and the poisoner likewise animated by some exalted, if despicable motive, now “the crime is a matter of business and arithmetical calculation,” a base commercial transaction. “A generous nature may be betrayed into a great crime by passion,” it concluded, “but he who poisons to cheat an insurance office, can have no motive but the pence.”

Commentators also accounted for the historically specific anxieties surrounding criminal poisoning by reference to the scientific character

34 Ibid.
of their times. To poison with subtlety and calculation (that is, to poison in the modern idiom) was to poison with science. Indeed, in the opinion of The Times, progress in chemistry and toxicology itself imposed this menacing logic: “We have now reached that advanced stage of civilisation in which it is discovered that drowning a fellow creature, or cutting his throat, or pouring hot lead into his ears, or poisoning him coarsely like a rat, is utterly vain, detection following guilt with fearful accuracy. If it is to be done, it must be done scientifically.”

In its reliance on knowledge over force, moreover, poisoning suggested a kind of perverse meritocracy of learning, featuring a science commodified and popularized through its engagement with the market. Knowledge of the laboratory once (and properly) reserved for the few had become packaged for sale, not merely by means of the modern romance novel (a large proportion of which, the London Medical Gazette complained, “may be regarded as convenient hand-books of poisoning”), but also by the deplorable enterprise of “modern utilitarian philosophers who display their anxiety to establish a free trade in all descriptions of useful and useless knowledge, by doling out natural philosophy by the shilling’s-worth, and by imparting a comprehensive insight into the mysteries of the occult sciences in lectures which are very considerately and judiciously limited to the brief period of half an hour.”

Nowhere was the correlation between civilization and subtle scientific crime more starkly drawn than in a Leader editorial published as the facts of the Cook case were emerging. The peculiar terror generated by the present poisoning wave, it suggested, lay in the realization that “the very regularity of our lives suggests a means for the malefactor to arrive at his purpose, just as the innumerable legal securities for the protection of money transactions furnish opportunities for the forger.” But the most troubling point raised in the editorial was suggested by its title, “Poison in the Prescription.” The doctor as poisoner combined concerns about the illusory basis of regular domestic relations—the doctor at the bedside, in this instance—with those linking knowledge to crime. “Give a medical man motives for getting rid of his patient,” the Leader warned, “and unless he is very clumsy . . . he can poison [him] without detection.” Here the instabilities characteristic of modern life were laid bare, its categories of order placed on a shifting continuum rather than secured in fixed opposition: progressive knowledge bore the seeds of evil, the

37 “Poison in the Prescription,” Leader 6 (22 December 1855): 1224.
38 Ibid.
healer was also the destroyer, medicine and poison were not in the last instance distinct and opposing entities.39

Yet if the advance and dissemination of scientific knowledge were part of the problem, they might also represent a solution. Scientists were daily adding to their store of preventative and detective knowledge, and the publicity given to matters of poisoning and to chemistry in general made for a more vigilant citizenry. Thus, despite the dialectical logic of knowledge and refinement, professions of faith that science could in fact win out over the machinations of the secret poisoner were voiced repeatedly. In 1850, the Home Secretary, Sir George Grey, took to the floor of the Commons to assure members “that the detection of murder by poison was so easy that few of them escaped.”40 Votes of confidence in modern toxicology were cast right up to eve of the Rugeley affair: the week before the Cook inquest, a Lancet editorial on a recently concluded poisoning case was glowing in its praise for the leading toxicological witnesses, boasting that the evidence given by Taylor and his colleagues had proven “an admirable example of the certainty of the conclusions that modern chemistry and medicine may supply.”41

III

Clearly, then, the nation had been well primed for the events at Rugeley. Palmer—gambler, insurance profiteer, and medical renegade—nonetheless quickly took on proportions all his own, representing as he did the dangerous connections between civilization and poison about which so much was being said. When Alfred Swaine Taylor arrived to give evidence at the Rugeley inquest, he did so representing science’s promise to defend civilization against the lethal consequences of its own advances.

The initial reviews of Taylor’s performance were favorable, so much so that they at times seemed to betray a desperate rush to declare science capable of exposing the secret poisoner’s insidious designs. A tension between faith and anxiety was conspicuous in the Examiner’s first commentary on the Palmer affair, entitled “Science in the Witness Box.” Subsequently reprinted in The Times, this lengthy editorial consti-

39 On more than one occasion, Alfred Swaine Taylor himself reluctantly noted the difficulties in deriving the distinctive properties of poison, writing, e.g., that “we may admit the general truth of the doctrine, that a poison in a small dose is a medicine, and a medicine in a large dose is a poison.” Taylor, On Poisons, 2d American ed. from the 2d London ed. (Philadelphia, 1859), pp. 2–3.
40 Hansard’s, 3d ser., 110 (May 1850); 1056–57.
tuted a high-profile assessment of the contest between poisoner and scientist in the wake of the Cook inquest and the ensuing inquest on the exhumed body of Palmer’s wife. It was, in one sense, a pure celebration of a triumphalist toxicology. True, the Rugeley inquests had made it clear that “none of us can be assured against the machinations of the poisoner,” but equally evident and more striking still was the fact that science had made the poisoner’s life a “hell on earth,” an infernal wait for the inevitable day of discovery. The scientific evidence on display at the Rugeley inquests had proven, to the Examiner’s great satisfaction, that toxicological expertise had become equal to the challenge of exposing even the most skillful of poisoners: “We do not remember any case exemplifying so remarkably the great advance made in our time by science, not only as our helper in every-day life, but as a power bearing witness against crime.”

The striking characteristic of the Examiner’s opinion piece was not so much its professed faith in the efficacy of science, however, as its insistent recourse to the “speaking body” in articulating its vision of science triumphant. Significantly, its body of choice was not the recalcitrant corpse of Cook, but the more cooperative one of Palmer’s wife, Anne. Like Cook’s, her body had, on analysis, yielded antimony, but unlike Cook’s it had done so in a quantity and a pattern of absorption that would account for death. Using this as its exemplary model, the Examiner declared that bodies could now be relied upon to testify against their assassins, the postmortem examination serving as a call to “let the dead speak.” The Examiner then turned to the idiom of speech and the relays of translation that had rendered Anne Palmer’s body meaningful: “The dead woman has spoken, and science has presented itself as interpreter. . . . Not only is the tale of poison told with wonderful precision, but the poison itself is produced in court. The antimony in this bottle, says what remains of the murdered woman, was given to me days before I died; here is the antimony given only a few hours before my death; this again is the poison that ran through my heart.”

There were two inquests held at Rugeley connected with Palmer in addition to and immediately following Cook’s: those on the exhumed bodies of his wife, Anne, and his brother, Walter. Taylor gave evidence at both of these inquests, finding antimony in Anne’s organs and prussic acid in Walter’s. In mid-January, Rugeley inquest jurors returned verdicts of murder against Palmer in both Anne and Walter’s deaths. But by this time Palmer had already been arraigned for trial for the murder of Cook. It was thus for Cook’s death that Palmer was eventually tried, though the charges in the deaths of Anne and Walter remained outstanding if the Cook prosecution failed. Legal niceties were not strictly followed in public comment, however, which tended to refer collectively to the three inquests as “The Rugeley Poisoning Case.”


Ibid.
Yet at the same time, the occultish overtones of the Examiner's celebration, replete with speaking corpses and testifying test tubes, threatened to destabilize the very system of meaning that the editorial sought to uphold. Like the repeated pleadings for Palmer to make a gallows confession, the Examiner was placing in the same analytical frame the ostensibly self-sufficient methods of scientific detection with what seemed like the atavistic desires of a more credulous age. But here the manifest function of the speaking corpse was to confirm the ascendancy of science over another "primitive" discourse of proof: "How vaguely was this foreshadowed in the superstition of our forefathers, whose notion of the best evidence of foul play was to bring a suspected murderer into the presence of the corpse [in the belief that it would bleed]! Precisely the same notion we now carry into effect; but for the supernatural there is put a natural language, which science has acquired the power of interpreting." 45 The Examiner thus insisted that bodies, through the offices of scientific expertise, could be made to testify not as a matter of superstition but as a matter of science; the invisible and ephemeral weapon insinuated into the civilized social body could be made tangible through chemical analysis and could itself be brought into court as demonstrative proof of the crime.

As the case of Palmer unfolded, however, the certitudes of scientific translation, the promise of a reconstituted poisonous agent, and the declarative voice of the body from the grave were each put to a severe test. Most obviously, the Examiner's model of chemical materialism appeared to be incompatible with the absence of strychnine in Cook's body, thereby threatening to expose a gap between public expectations and scientific practice. This problem was not new to toxicologists: Taylor himself had broached the issue, with marked ambivalence, in his 1848 edition of On Poisons. As there was not a test for every known poison, and since for those amenable to analysis a variety of circumstances might occur to prevent their detection, Taylor had been anxious not to limit proofs in poisoning cases solely to chemical analysis. "All that is required legally," he insisted, "is that there should be satisfactory proof of a person having died from poison;—the discovery of poison in the body is not necessarily evidence of its having caused death, nor is its non-discovery evidence that death has not been caused by it." 46

Yet in the next paragraph Taylor proceeded to trade on the very supposition of materiality that was thought to distinguish chemical from

45 Ibid.
general forms of medical evidence. The capacity of toxicological analysis to supply tangible evidence where other inquiries had failed, he observed, had been proven on numerous past occasions to the satisfaction of “the public mind.” In most cases, Taylor continued, toxicology “demonstrates at once the means of death; while symptoms and post-mortem appearances are, as we have seen, fallible criteria.” Therefore, while disavowing materiality as a binding standard for toxicology, Taylor nonetheless left intact the component pieces out of which its special evidentiary claims were built. The test tube, if qualified in theory, was still a viable and in some sense a legitimate symbolic counter to the threat posed by the secret poisoner.

Taylor’s concerns were magnified in accounts of the Palmer case published in *The Times*, the *Saturday Review*, and elsewhere. Criticism from such quarters, however, paled in comparison to that made in “The Doctor in the Witness-Box.” This article, appearing in the February 1856 issue of the *Dublin University Magazine*, featured an extensive denunciation of what it saw as the newly inflated ambitions of medical witnesses, who were “abandoning their position as indifferent auxiliaries of justice and advancing pretensions to direct and administer it.” Far from representing “a field wherein it is safe to erect a gallows,” medical jurisprudence in general, and toxicology in particular, was subject to the vicissitudes of intellectual fashion, public sentiment, and the subjective and metaphysical longings of its practitioners. As a result, it proves “absolutely impossible for the ordinary administrators of the law to test a skilled medical witness, who becomes, in fact, himself, a jury sole, whose verdict is the more fatal, inasmuch as, however he may be led astray by the fantasies of science, the instinct of the chase, or the influence of popular prejudice, he is commonly a man of unquestionable respectability, and often of considerable talents and learning.”

The presumed status of the chemical evidence led others to warn

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48 A similar conclusion had been reached by the author of the leading British manual on toxicology prior to Taylor’s: the renowned Scottish toxicologist, Professor Robert Christison, though mindful of the limits of toxicological proof, maintained that “the chemical evidence in charges of poisoning is generally, and with justice, considered the most decisive of all the branches of proof” (*A Treatise on Poisons*, 4th ed. [Edinburgh, 1845], p. 60).

49 *The Times* (24 December 1855): 6; “Poisoning in England,” *Saturday Review* 1 (22 December 1855): 135. At professional meetings medical men could indulge in similar exercises in critical assessment. See *Lloyd’s Weekly London Newspaper* (17 February 1856): 7, for one such discussion in which Taylor was denounced for his indulgence in “the transcendentalism of the laboratory.”

against a different form of mystification, equally dangerous in its effect, though opposite in its cause. This threat did not derive from the undue probative value accorded to science, but from the propensity of its representatives to confuse matters to such an extent that a humane jury could do nothing other than acquit. The question to be decided in the Palmer case, the *Illustrated Times* warned in its issue just prior to the opening of the trial, was ultimately not the value of this or that scientific theory, but the guilt or innocence of Palmer, and the safety of the nation in the face of the poisoning menace. Yet it feared “that this trial may be made so much an opportunity for Dr. A. to fight Dr. B. that, between both, the jury may get puzzled and the prisoner off. Not for an instant do we presume to disparage the sacred importance of the scientific evidence, but we can only hope that it will be remembered that it is not *science only*, but the application of science to a particular question, which is required.”

Medical journals also acknowledged the possibility of tensions between public and scientific standards of proof in the upcoming trial, and devoted a portion of their pretrial commentary to devising ways to defuse them. The *Lancet*, most notably, urged Taylor and others concerned with the Crown’s evidence to renounce secrecy, even where legally sanctioned. All requests from Palmer’s defense regarding the details of the Crown’s toxicological findings should be honored, and the process of generating the scientific evidence should involve some form of “external observation to inspire the public mind with confidence in the results.”

In the midst of ruminations about evidentiary vacuums, scientific pedantry, and the closed world of the laboratory, Taylor himself took the unusual step of issuing a number of public statements in the months leading up to the trial, the most controversial of which appeared in the *Illustrated Times’s* fourteen-page special supplement on the Rugeley poisonings. Henry Mayhew, who had been commissioned by the paper to write an investigative series on the connections between life insurance and crime, published—purportedly with Taylor’s blessing—the details of his conversation with the “learned analyst” upon whose findings, Mayhew ventured, “will probably depend the fate of the prisoner.” Though he subsequently denied having granted permission for the publication of any information relating to the Palmer investigation, Taylor seems to have taken advantage of the opportunity afforded by Mayhew to prepare the public to assess equivocal toxicological results. Taylor, Mayhew wrote, “here requested us to state that although the practice of

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51 *Illustrated Times* 2 (17 May 1856): 338; emphasis in original.
secret poisoning appeared to be on the increase, it should be remembered that by analysis the chemist could almost always detect the presence of poison in the body, and that when analysis failed, as in cases where small doses of strychnia had been administered, physiology and pathology would invariably suffice to establish the cause of death. Of this there could be no doubt, and the fact could not be made too public."

In May of 1856, then, the public standing of toxicology was far from straightforward: its leading spokesman was equivocal on the legitimacy of expectations placed on toxicological proof, press opinion was divided between those who warned against sacrificing common sense to chemical pedantry and those denouncing the subjective influences at the root of the "detection mania," and the medical press seemed to acknowledge the profession’s vulnerability to charges of authoritarianism in taking away the public’s capacity for participatory judgment. In this context the case of William Palmer was tried.

IV

Sixty witnesses (more than half of whom were called as representatives of science in one guise or another) testified during Palmer’s twelve-day trial. Subsequent printed accounts drawn from court reporters’ notes typically exceeded 300 pages, of which well over two-thirds were devoted to medical and chemical matters, a proportion roughly conforming to the distribution of coverage in the major press accounts. Toxicology was of course not the only figure in the legal drama: the significance of Palmer’s suspicious actions both before and after the death, his financial troubles, his efforts at sabotaging the postmortem investigations, his purchase of strychnine prior to Cook’s death, and many other considerations were woven together by the prosecution into a fine chain of circumstantial inference—one that the defense, of course, disputed at crucial links. But as the defense and prosecution both predicted early in the presentation of their respective cases, toxicology, and the toxicology of strychnine in particular, was to play the pivotal role. The defense urged that the law required not only motive and compelling circumstantial evidence

53 “Our Interview with Dr. Alfred Taylor,” Illustrated Times Supplement: The Rugeley Number 2 (2 February 1856): 91; emphasis in original. At Palmer’s trial, Taylor vehemently denied having given Mayhew permission to publish from their discussion, calling it “the greatest deception that was ever practised on a scientific man; most disgraceful.” The Queen v. Palmer. Verbatim Report of the Trial of W. Palmer at the Central Criminal Court, Old Bailey, London, May 14, and Following Days, 1856. . . Transcribed from the Short Hand Notes of Mr. Angelo Bennett (London, 1856), p. 147. The Mayhew in question is sometimes identified as Augustus, Henry’s brother, but Henry claimed responsibility for the interview in letters to the editors of several leading newspapers.
for a poisoning conviction, but a clear demonstration that “the symptoms of the deceased before death, and the appearance presented by his body after death, were consistent with the theory of death by strychnia poisoning, and inconsistent with the theory of death from other and natural causes.”"54 The prosecution agreed: the dispute was over how such a proof was to be made and who was qualified to make it. Indeed, the first day was sufficient for the Daily Telegraph to pronounce on the importance to be accorded science in the trial: “Enough will be gathered from the Attorney General’s speech to show that the temple of justice is to be converted into an arena for a display of learning and skill of rival chemists and physicians.”55

These predictions proved correct. The jury heard opinions as to the significance of the absent strychnine throughout the trial, from the prosecutorial address that opened it to the closing words of Lord Chief Justice Campbell’s summation of evidence.56 In his opening remarks, the Crown’s lead prosecutor, the Attorney General Alexander Cockburn, directly confronted the lack of strychnine in Cook’s body. This seemed a fatal weakness in his case, Cockburn admitted, but he urged that in this case everyday notions of material proof would have to yield to scientific nuance. “You will be told, and told with truth,” Cockburn informed the jury, that “no trace of strychnine was discovered; but I am told by high authority that although the presence of strychnine may be discovered by certain tests, and although the indication of its presence would lead irresistibly to the conclusion of its having been administered, the converse of the proposition does not hold; it is found sometimes, at other times it is not; it depends on circumstances.”57 Cockburn proceeded to lay out the variables that might place toxicological analysis in this tenuous position. The material submitted to Taylor for examination, for one thing, had been significantly compromised: Palmer’s alleged interference at the postmortem table had reduced both the quantity and quality of matter able to be examined; the fact that the initial postmortem examination conducted by local general practitioners had not been exhaustive also meant that some of Taylor’s most vital tests had to be performed on putrefied material extracted from Cook’s exhumed body.

54 Bennett, The Queen v. Palmer, p. 175. Bennett’s is the most complete of the numerous printed reports of the trial, and is, unless otherwise stated, the source of all quotes from the trial that appear in this essay.
56 Campbell’s concluding summation put the question directly, leaving no doubt as to the fundamental point upon which the whole case rested: “Do not find a verdict of guilty unless you believe that the strychnine was administered to the deceased by the prisoner at the bar” (Bennett, The Queen v. Palmer, p. 325; emphasis in original).
57 Ibid., p. 24.
These circumstances conspired with the lethal properties of strychnine to make its absence in a body no grounds to exclude it as the murderous agent. A substance at once organic and singularly deadly, Cockburn explained, strychnine was "not like a mineral poison, which may be easily detected and reproduced in specie."\textsuperscript{58} Had the strychnine been given in a large quantity this would not have posed a problem, since rapid death would have resulted from the absorption of a minute trace, and a residue of poison would have remained intact for the analyst to detect. But a physiologically sophisticated poisoner—a licensed medical man, for instance—might introduce the minimum lethal dose, leaving no unabsorbed excess.

Moreover, strychnine affected the nerves controlling the voluntary muscles, inducing convulsive symptoms that, Cockburn declared, were "known to medical men under the term of tetanus."\textsuperscript{59} This involved the case in still another layer of potential obfuscation. Though he insisted that the tetanic effects of strychnine were distinct from ordinary forms of tetanus, Cockburn admitted that death by strychnine did broadly mimic a recognizable natural pattern. Palmer, "a medical man, understanding the use of strychnia and its effects," had been in a position to take advantage of this symptomatological continuum, as indeed were the experts now called in his defense.\textsuperscript{60} Accordingly, Cockburn urged the jury to be vigilant against attempts to "confound" the unnatural with the natural, poison with disease.

Reiterated by the prosecution's scientific witnesses, Cockburn's argument received further support from the presiding judge, Lord Chief Justice Campbell. In his final summation, Campbell acknowledged the commonsense bias against the prosecution's charge of strychnine poisoning but advised that "there is no point of law according to which the poison must be found in the body of the deceased; and all that we know respecting the poison not being in the body of Cook is, that in that part of the body that was analysed by Drs. Taylor and Rees they found no strychnia."\textsuperscript{61} The absence of material proof of strychnine poisoning was thus accounted for as a matter of science and marginalized as a legal inference. In his closing remarks, Cockburn warned that if the proposition that poison must be found in order for poisoning to be proven were to become a matter of legal doctrine, it would be tantamount to giving the chemically sophisticated a license to kill.\textsuperscript{62}

\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., p. 10; emphasis in original.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., p. 11.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., p. 319.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., p. 288.
The defense also believed that the case had grave implications for public safety but cast these in a different light altogether. The greatest threat represented in the trial, argued Palmer’s lead attorney, Mr. Serjeant Shee, was not the medical poisoner, but the authoritarian medical detective who, by virtue of his purported expertise, was unaccountable to common standards of material proof. Taylor’s claims carried little credence in this particular case, Shee began, because if Cook’s convulsive symptoms had been caused by strychnine their suddenness and intensity indicated a pattern of administration favorable to detection. The dose would have been large, the death swift, and the stomach contents undiluted and undisturbed. The fact of Taylor’s reputed skill as a chemical analyst was thereby turned to the defense’s advantage: if strychnine was present, who better to detect it than the renowned author of On Poisons? At a broader level, Shee continued, Taylor’s insistence on his theory of strychnine poisoning despite its absence in Cook’s body turned on the dangerous claim that science should be accorded a distinct discourse of proof, one that stood independent of external examination and assessment. “If science is admitted to dogmatise in our courts—science not exact in its nature—science not successful, but baffled even by its own tests—science bearing upon its forehead the motto that ‘a little learning is a dangerous thing’—if that is to be introduced into state processes of arriving at truth, conclusive to its satisfaction, but which we cannot follow,” Shee warned, not just his client, but society writ large, would be the loser.63

The contest over standards of proof governing toxicological analysis merged with questions about the conditions under which science testified in courts of law and about the ultimate foundation of expert knowledge. Charges of partisanship were raised on both sides. Cockburn, claiming that defense experts had been “retained” to minimize the real difficulties of strychnine’s demonstrability,64 denounced what he described as a sacrifice of scientific objectivity: “I abhor the traffic in testimony to which I regret to say some men of science sometimes permit themselves to condescend.”65 Shee, for his part, argued that the Crown’s case trafficked in another form of unscientific coin, one backed by overvalued personal

63 Ibid., p. 190.
64 Taylor later explained how: in the 1859 edition of On Poisons, he wrote that most of the time “detection” of strychnine by laboratory scientists actually amounted to its extraction from the compound nux vomica. “Knowing well that an animal that dies from nux vomica dies from absorbed strychnia, they have contented themselves with seeking for nux vomica powder and extracting strychnia from it” (p. 74). Strychnine, then, was typically isolated as a secondary property only, and claims to have detected it merely the “sagacity of the ex post facto kind” (p. 77).
and institutional reputation. From the very beginning of his association with the case, Shee maintained, Taylor had been the quintessential partisan. Taylor’s initial examination had been biased by the stepfather’s suspicions that Cook had not died a natural death. His performance at the Talbot Arms confirmed him as an interested party. Having staked his credentials as an expert witness on a highly speculative theory supported by mere “taproom gossip,” he had publicly backed himself into a corner: “That opinion was delivered, was irrevocable [sic]. By it Taylor’s reputation was staked against Palmer’s life.”

Despite the obvious bias of Taylor’s evidence, Shee worried aloud, it might well prove effective. This was because, as had been the prosecution’s intention, the influence of prestige threatened to obscure the practical deficiencies in its scientific evidence. Deference to institutionalized metropolitan medicine, according to Shee, explained why Taylor’s “audacious” charge at the Talbot Arms had swayed the inquest jury. The subsequent public discussion of the case in the buildup to the trial had only fanned the flames: recalling the imagery of triumphalist and infallible toxicology that had marked early reports of the Rugeley affair, Shee complained that “for six long months, under the sanction and upon the authority of science, an opinion has universally prevailed that the voice of the blood of John Parsons Cook was crying up unto us from the ground.”

But, Shee advised the jury, the prosecution’s witnesses, drawn from the elite of British hospital medicine, were precisely the wrong representatives of science to interpret correctly any story that might emanate from Cook’s blood. The question to be answered of Cook’s death, in the absence of a clear trace of poison, was whether it could be ascribed to a natural cause. The Crown’s reliance on prestige was thus misguided, if strategically efficacious. Were a reliable answer sincerely wished, Shee insisted, it was to be sought outside the hospital and the laboratory. He therefore proposed to tap into another vein of expertise, by passing over

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66 Bennett, The Queen v. Palmer, p. 189. Shee charged that following the inquest Taylor had resorted to the press in a deliberate attempt to manipulate public opinion.

67 All present at the inquest, Shee argued, were “impressed with the idea that whatever the doctor that has come from London, that whatever Dr. Alfred Swaine Taylor says, must be true; if he says it is poison, poison it is” (ibid., p. 202). The same deference then ensured that the jury’s finding would meet with general approval: “Instantly followed by the verdict of willful murder, it flew upon the wings of the press into every house in the United Kingdom. It became known that, according to the opinion of a man whose whole life had been devoted to science, a gentleman of personal character perfectly unimpeached, a man who stood well with his friends in the medical profession... that, according to his opinion, Cook’s death had been caused by strychnine” (ibid., p. 189).

68 Ibid., p. 174.
"mere surgeons of hospitals" whose experience with convulsive symptoms was limited to traumatic cases, in favor of "general practitioners—men who enjoy the entire confidence of numerous families, and have the opportunity of visiting, in the way of their profession, the poor at their lowly dwellings, suffering under sudden convulsions when affected by serious disease: those are the men that we want to tell us about convulsions." 69 Taylor himself had publicly declared that where chemistry failed, physiology would prevail. Shee added only that what was required was not a physiology of the extraordinary, but of the everyday. His witnesses duly complied: though disagreeing as to what Cook's dying symptoms signified, the defense experts were as one in declaring that they did not match the profile of strychnine poisoning that each had derived from either his own clinical or experimental practice. 70

Of course there was room for toxicological evidence as well. Here too, Shee insisted, the Crown had opted for notoriety over real knowledge in selecting its experts. He acknowledged Taylor as the nation's leading authority on toxicology, the author of the most substantive work on the subject in the English language. Yet in questioning Taylor, Shee sought to expose the limits of this description, pressing him on the extent of his direct experience with the action of strychnine. From the witness-box Taylor stated that he had never personally seen a human case of strychnine poisoning and that his experimental knowledge was limited both in number (ten studies, five of which had been conducted over twenty years ago) and in kind (involving rabbits only, owing to Taylor's fear of dogs). "Is that the only knowledge of the effects of strychnia poison on animal life which you had when you wrote your book?" Shee inquired. Taylor conceded the point, insisting in reply that the research reported in the scientific literature rendered further testing unnecessary. 71

Later in his presentation Shee contrasted the prosecution's experimental recalcitrance with the more enthusiastic and demonstrative approach offered by his experts. He proposed "that some morning before the Court sits . . . a reasonable number of animals shall be brought into one of the yards of this building, and that you will see them die by strychnia, and form an opinion yourselves." Though Lord Chief Justice

69 Ibid., pp. 197–98.
70 Alternatives to the theory of strychnine poisoning ranged from epileptic convulsions with tetanic complications, angina pectoris, spinal cord irritation of undetermined cause, and tetanic convulsions brought on by wet and cold acting on a body debilitated by syphilis.
71 Taylor retorted: "Every toxicologist will not sacrifice 100 rabbits when the facts are all ascertained from other sources; I did not feel myself justified in going on points which I knew were well established" (Bennett, The Queen v. Palmer, pp. 144–45).
POISONING OF NO SUBSTANCE

Campbell ruled out this proposed exercise in unmediated experimental testimony, Shee had made his point. When he subsequently advised the jury to conclude from Taylor’s testimony that the famed toxicologist “has not any knowledge as to the effects of strychnia more than any of us,” Shee was in effect challenging the very claims to disembodied and professionally sanctioned authority upon which medical jurisprudence was supposed to be based.

Shee’s interrogation of the prosecution’s star witness, then, not only served to demystify the textual authority of “Taylor” but also highlighted an uncertainty in the protocols for applying scientific expertise to matters of law. Though by midcentury it was a well-settled principle of evidentiary admissibility that, unlike ordinary witnesses, experts could testify on the basis of opinion—and even of opinion not derived from their own firsthand observation—a good deal of ambiguity still remained about the proper limits of this privilege. In 1851, Robert Christison, the doyen of Scottish toxicology and a pioneer of British legal medicine, produced a seminal article that sought to clarify the situation. There was a pronounced bias in the legal mind favoring testimony based on direct experience, Christison wrote, a bias that betrayed a fundamental misunderstanding of the way that the science of medicine actually worked. Medical knowledge, both in its own domain and as applied to legal matters, was largely built out of the observations of others—initially those of the patient himself or herself. Medical “facts,” then, were rare in the legal sense of the term. Medicine instead proceeded on “opinion,” exercises in synthetic reasoning based on mediated observation, the value of which could not be measured by the standards normally applied to legal testimony. Despite the fact that some judges still disallowed knowledge derived from sources other than direct personal observation (particularly knowledge gleaned from published authorities), recourse to textual authority, in Christison’s view, indicated strength in the

72 Ibid., p. 201.
73 Ibid., p. 190. The problematic relationship among author, text, and testimony in fact forms an important subtext running through the trial transcript: questions were posed about whether Taylor and other authors appeared as themselves or as embodiments of their works (e.g., pp. 144 and 200); controversy arose from having textual excerpts read in court in the absence of their authors (e.g., pp. 196–97); and the general constraints of transcribing experience into writing were discussed at length (e.g., pp. 201, 250).
74 See, e.g., Thomas Starkie, A Practical Treatise on the Law of Evidence (London, 1834), 1:154: “The testimony of medical men is constantly admitted with respect to the cause of disease or death. . . . Such opinions are admissible in evidence, although the professional witnesses found them entirely on the facts, circumstances, and symptoms established in evidence by others, and without being personally acquainted with the facts.” See also S. M. Phillippis, Treatise on the Law of Evidence (London, 1852; reprint, New York, 1859), 1:778–79.
witness rather than deficiency. A man of true learning, relying as he would on "the facts and principles derived from the classified testimony of hundreds of prior observers," reasoned more soundly than one who, "affecting to despise learning, boasts that he relies only upon his own narrow opportunities of direct experience." From the standpoint of medico-legal theory, then, there was nothing extraordinary in Taylor’s claims, either as author or authority.

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When, on 27 May 1856, William Palmer was finally convicted on the charge of murdering John Parsons Cook, most observers expressed themselves satisfied: "In the justice of the verdict every one who has followed these memorable proceedings must fully concur," commented The Times.76 Voices of dissent could be heard amid the celebratory chorus, however. In the fortnight between Palmer’s conviction and his execution, scores of letters to newspapers and to the Home Office urged a stay of execution pending a review of the scientific evidence, while at public meetings impassioned resolutions were passed on behalf of the condemned man. Given the "grave doubts as to whether or not John Parson Cook died from strychnia," one such resolution insisted, further inquiry was essential: "If Palmer was executed," its proposer added with a flourish, "he would be executed to satisfy a scientific hypothesis."77

Though such expressions of disquiet were widely denounced as contrary to general opinion, spawned not by a sense of justice but by mauldin sensibility or worse,78 even in their embrace of the verdict commentators

75 Robert Christison, "On the Present State of Medical Evidence," Edinburgh Medical Review, n.s., 23 (November 1851): 401–30, quote on 420–21. Christison illustrated this claim with a case of arsenic poisoning that he had once been called upon to investigate: though he had not previously seen anyone during life who had taken arsenic, "by frequent reading, lecturing, and writing on the subject, the varied forms of arsenical poisoning were as familiar to me as if they were all marshaled before my eyes" (p. 421).

76 The Times (28 May 1856): 9; for similarly approving editorials from across the political spectrum, see the Examiner (31 May 1856): 337; Lloyd’s (4 June 1856): 6; and the Saturday Review (31 May 1856): 102. The professional journals concurred: "The verdict," the Law Times opined, "accords with the public judgment, and with the opinion formed by the gravest and most clamant [sic] reflective minds in the Profession, accustomed to weigh the worth of evidence" (Law Times [31 May 1856]: 110). See also the Association Medical Journal, n.s., 4 (31 May 1856): 455; the Lancet 1 (31 May 1856): 593–94; and the Medical Times and Gazette 12 (31 May 1856): 533. Of the mainstream press, the Daily Telegraph stood out in its support of a stay of execution pending a review of the evidence (31 May 1856, 3 June 1856).

77 The Times (11 June 1856): 5.

78 The most striking exercise in marginalization appeared in the Examiner, which in praising the Home Secretary (Sir George Grey) for resisting these efforts suggested that the real motive behind much of the Palmerite sentiment was all too well in keeping with the degenerate essence of its object: "Among those who were not the least anxious to
voiced criticism of the relationship between science and law displayed at the trial. The "unseemly" spectacle of scientific contention, the scene of experts pitted against one another "like rats or prize-fighters," had, for one thing, clearly done medical jurisprudence a disservice. Furthermore, and notwithstanding the press's own coverage of the trial, editorials in the aftermath of the verdict suggested that the attention devoted to the scientific niceties of the trial had obscured the broader evidentiary grounds on which the conviction rested. "The importance of the medical evidence in this trial has been wonderfully overrated," Lloyd's opined. The Lancet proposed a slightly different version of this diagnosis: though correct in looking to science to solve the crime, the public, because of its crude sense of how scientific demonstration worked, had misunderstood the proof. Yet this gap was not unbridgeable. If carefully led through a retrospective of the medical grounds for conviction, the Lancet insisted, the public could be made to appreciate a more balanced discourse of proof. Though the Palmer jury must have convicted on the basis of circumstance, there was cause to hope that, through public education, future cases would instead be decided on sound scientific conclusions.

procure his pardon or commutation of punishment," the Examiner explained with great indignation. "were the large number of persons who had bets on his escape from the gallows" ("Palmer's End," Examiner [21 June 1856]: 386).


Ibid. In explaining why the conviction was just, however, Lloyd's ultimately relied on the medical evidence. Taylor or his courtroom adversaries might be right—an important difference in medical opinion, but a difference that "almost loses its significance, when we remember that the effects produced by strychnia in its last struggle with the vital principle are happily so marked and peculiar that a tyro in medicine could hardly fail to identify them."

"Juries and the public generally," the Lancet explained, "always look for the material demonstration of the poison in the dead body" and thus had naturally turned to the test tube for the solution, to the exclusion of the evidence adduced by the whole of the medico-legal arsenal. "The Medical Evidence in the Case of The Queen versus Palmer," Lancet 1 (31 May 1856): 594.

In accordance with this view, the Lancet devoted the better part of its posttrial commentary to beginning precisely this task of public education: by careful exegesis of the medical evidence in the case—abstracted from the contentious atmosphere of the Old Bailey—it proposed to demonstrate to the public that science, unaided by "collateral information or inferences," could provide proof of Palmer's guilt. By this means, it concluded, "juries will learn how distinct and independent and authoritative the decision of Medicine may be in cases of this kind, and the public will perceive ample reason for placing firm reliance upon science for the detection and prevention of crime ("The Scientific Evidence on the Trial of William Palmer," Lancet 1 [14 June 1856]: 662–67. Many of the Lancet's contemporaries did not share its optimism, looking instead to more concerted cooperation between medico-legal witnesses prior to trial as a way of presenting the public with a unified scientific front. For proposals of this nature, see the Association Medical Journal, n.s., 4 (31 May 1856): 455–57, and the Medical Times and Gazette 12 (28 June 1856): 647–48.
V

This essay began with a set of observations on the ambiguities of closure. At its end, though better equipped to understand the frustration felt by contemporaries when confronted with Palmer’s declaration at the scaffold, we are again left with the question of how, at the historical and historiographic level, closure works in the case of William Palmer. Had Palmer been “executed to satisfy a scientific hypothesis”? Or has, in the course of time, the more knowledgeable public anticipated by the *Lancet* come to a just appreciation of Taylor’s triumph, in the name of science, over “the Rugeley poisoner”? In the immediate aftermath of the trial, the response to these questions was decidedly mixed, with Taylor alternatively (and at times simultaneously) held up as the exemplary expert witness, sacrificed in the name of the very expertise he represented, and condemned as the harbinger of a new and dangerous set of scientific pretensions. Taylor’s public image remained ambiguous until his death some twenty years later: on the one hand, Taylor continued to serve, as one historian has observed, as “the high priest of British medical jurisprudence,” his work in the courtroom, in the laboratory, and on the numerous medico-legal advisory committees having a profound influence on the field; on the other hand, these years of apparent ascendancy were by no means free from courtroom controversy.83

But if, in his enactments of medico-legal authority, Taylor was subject to the instabilities inherent in public performance, there was another domain in which he could exercise far greater control. As the *British Medical Journal* observed at his death in 1880, “his Principles and Practice of Medical Jurisprudence, and his Handbook on Poisons are standard works not only in this country, but throughout the world.”84 And it was

83 Altick, *Victorian Studies*, p. 164. Following another controversial appearance at an 1859 murder trial, the *Dublin Medical Press* pronounced Taylor’s credibility to be at an end: “We must look now upon Professor Taylor as having ended his career, and hope he will immediately withdraw into the obscurity of private life” (cited in Norman Donaldson, *In Search of Dr. Thoroodyke: The Story of R. Austin Freeman’s Great Scientific Investigator and His Creator* [Bowling Green, Ohio, 1971], p. 73). Historians also give conflicting assessments of Taylor’s standing. Boyle describes the Palmer trial as “the beginning of Taylor’s downfall,” the effects of which, he improbably continues, rivaled the publication of Darwin’s *Origin of Species* in provoking “a challenge to Victorian self-confidence” (*Black Swine*, p. 76). At the opposite pole, Carol Jones’s *Expert Witnesses: Science, Medicine, and the Practice of Law* (Oxford, 1994) sees Taylor as a prototype for an emergent cultural familiarity with and acceptance of “superhuman” experts, whose work in high profile cases bestowed on them “unimpeachable authority in the law courts and high social status” (pp. 80–81).

84 “Obituary,” *British Medical Journal* 1 (12 June 1880): 905. Though expressed in the inevitably inflated terms of the genre, the basic sense of this observation is undeniable. Reviews of the subsequent editions of Taylor’s works assume the texts’ canonical status—the *Solicitors’ Journal’s* notice of the third edition of *On Poisons*, for instance,
this platform that afforded Taylor his best opportunity for achieving closure on William Palmer. With "Taylor" as a standard work, a consensual version of Palmer could develop, one that contained his case within a stable narrative available for use by student and practitioner alike. By way of conclusion, then, I will show how, in this one critical domain, the battle between Taylor and Palmer continued, with Taylor adding layer upon layer of textual encoding through which he finally emerged victorious. A brief comparison of four key texts—the three editions of Taylor's *On Poisons in Relation to Medical Jurisprudence* (1848, 1859, and 1875) and his extended essay, "On Poisoning by Strychnia, with Comments on the Medical Evidence Given at the Trial of William Palmer," first published in the autumn following the trial—indicates the process by which Palmer the controversy became progressively transmuted into Palmer the case.

Taylor's first substantial treatment of the scientific evidence in the Palmer trial was, understandably, also the least mediated. Palmer's name itself appeared in the title, and the contingencies of his actions fundamentally shaped the discussion. Here, for example, Taylor most directly attributed the difficulties of the case to Palmer's medical training. The defense contention that the absence of strychnine in Cook's body amounted to a failure to establish the corpus delicti deliberately obscured the fact that "men of craft and skill in the medical profession" might poison without detection. Palmer thus appeared as a highly articulated agent, one whose particular knowledge could not be abstracted from an explication of the case. Similarly, Taylor cast his criticism of the defense witnesses in markedly personal terms, often invoking them through verbatim excerpts from the trial and thereby calling upon them to testify to their own injudicious pronouncements.

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observed that "this book is too well known as an authority to need any recommendation to our readers" (*Solicitors' Journal* [27 May 1876]: 587). More diffuse, but telling nonetheless, is the way "Taylor" came to serve as a veritable synecdoche for medical jurisprudential authority. Thus, some ten years after the Palmer trial, the *Solicitors' Journal* described the courtroom strategy of the average medical witness as follows: "Taylor's 'Medical Jurisprudence,' or some other work of equal reputation will be produced, and long extracts read" (*Solicitors' Journal* [19 August 1865]: 924). The same formula was being used at the turn of the century: Henry Harvey Littlejohn, the renowned Scottish forensic scientist, for one, complained that ignorance on the part of a medical witness was all too often covered by "a reference to 'Taylor'" ("Medico-Legal Post-Mortem Examinations," *Transactions of the Medico-Legal Society* 1 [1903]: 20).

Taylor, "On Poisoning by Strychnia, with Comments on the Medical Evidence Given at the Trial of William Palmer," *Guy's Hospital Reports*, 3d ser., 2 (1856): 269–404. This article was subsequently published as a separate tract.

Ibid., p. 271.

See, e.g., the excerpted comments of defense experts William Herapath, Henry Letheby, and Thomas Nunnerly. Ibid., pp. 364–68.
Yet "On Strychnia" was not merely an effort to reinforce the verdict in *The Queen v. Palmer*. In publishing it, Taylor also began a campaign to add Cook’s name to the roster of documented cases of strychnine poisoning, to constitute Cook as a secure marker of toxicological knowledge. The centerpiece of his exposition was an eight-page "table of cases" providing details of all the recorded cases to which, in his estimation, strychnine had been properly connected. The table was designed for comparative use, classifying the information of each of the sixteen cases under four headings (authority and date of occurrence; dose taken and symptoms observed; postmortem appearances; analysis and results). By this method Taylor aimed to underscore his contention at the trial that the defense had promoted a misleadingly idealized profile of strychnine poisoning:

By a comparative examination of the table, it will be seen that the case of Cook (No. 16, p. 352) is in close accordance with the general order and progress of the symptoms, as well as the appearances met with after death in the 15 fatal cases that are reported. If a medical witness insists upon selecting isolated symptoms or appearances for comparison, he will find an ample field for dispute in comparing known cases of poisoning by strychnia with each other. There are some in the tables that differ more from each other than Cook’s case differs from them. If he ignores facts, already recorded by others with no other view than that of contributing to the general stock of scientific knowledge, if he persists in confining his opinion to his own limited experiences of cases in the human subject, or if, in ignorance of reported cases in human beings, confines his inferences to results obtained from experiments on animals, he may be so far accurate in his evidence, but he will at the same time seriously mislead a Court of law.88

The table thus served two of Taylor’s purposes: it turned his criticism of the Palmer defense strategy into a general medico-legal principle, and suspended the once unruly "Cook" (now "No. 16, p. 352") within an ostensibly secure web of medico-legal signification.

The apparent ease with which Taylor effected closure on the Palmer case, however, is called into question by the text’s repeated engagement with the defense contention that Taylor’s own science had been uncertain. The most expedient way to convey this is to highlight a passage not of closely reasoned and documented scientific fact, but of fancy. Midway through his essay, Taylor interrupts a critique of the defense contention that negative test results disproved a charge of poisoning, to give (in

88 Ibid., p. 315.
three pages of condensed type, the longest passage of reported speech in the entire article) what in his view would have been a legitimate defense rebuttal had he and Rees claimed a positive identification of strychnine in Cook’s body. “What!” Taylor’s imagined inquisitor exclaimed after a dense and compelling exposure of the fallacies of “enthusiastic” chemistry: “a man’s life is to depend on the alleged detection of the 1000th of a grain of strychnia, and that, as I understand it, not actually separated in a tangible form, but merely judged to be present by two learned gentlemen who were diligently looking for it, expecting it, nay, wishing it, in order to bolster up their theory of the cause of death?”

Objections of this kind, Taylor concluded, would have been “very properly taken.” The cogency of Taylor’s hypothetical objection was of course intentional, serving to underscore both the plasticity of legal argument and the dangers inherent in toxicological “enthusiasm.” Professions of toxicological ambiguity, after all, were a necessary part of Taylor’s own position, but the fact that they appear as a matter of design does not preclude their capacity to subvert the foundations of Taylor’s own authorial position. Because of “On Strychnia’s” standing as an initial exercise in codifying Palmer, passages like this tended to exceed the limits set by Taylor. In treating The Queen v. Palmer as still something of an open text, Taylor had been compelled to expose the fallible workings of his science more than he might have wished.

The next significant engagement came some three years later, when, in 1859, Taylor published his second, and substantially revised, edition of On Poisons. Palmer’s presence is palpable in the 1859 version, Taylor himself noting in several places the unusual degree to which the case is invoked in, and indeed shapes, the text. In 1848, strychnine was an unremarkable three-page entry; in 1859, twenty-four pages were devoted to it, including six providing details of the Palmer case itself. Taylor’s discussion of the symptomatology and pathology of strychnine poisoning grew from two paragraphs to six pages, and it was here that Taylor first incorporated many of the terms used in the Palmer case—listing the “macabre grin” (or “risus sardonicus”) on Cook’s visage, the violent

89 Ibid., p. 341.
90 At times the reference to The Queen v. Palmer is a general one, referred to in one instance as “that memorable case which has furnished some point of illustration to almost every department of medical jurisprudence” (Taylor, On Poisons [1859], p. 195). Elsewhere the case is invoked to underscore a broad principle, as when he urges the fallacy of relying on positive tests as proof of poisoning: “In nearly every chapter on every poison in this volume, the reader will find that chemistry has in some cases completely failed to reveal the presence of poison, while in others it has misled an ‘expert’ to swear to the presence of poison in a definitive quantity in a dead body when the whole was a fiction of the imagination” (ibid., p. 702).
“twitching” and “jerking” of his body, and his sense of impending death (his repeated cry of “I shall die”) as integral signs of strychnine poisoning.91

Shifting the comparative focus from the first to the third edition, moreover, reveals the reverse tendency—toward a disassociation between knowledge of strychnine and knowledge of the Palmer case. Methods for detecting strychnine, for example (entirely absent from Taylor’s 1848 work), were laid out in 1859 with direct reference to the questions raised in the Palmer trial. By 1875, however, Palmer had been dispensed with as a framing apparatus. A similar process of disassociation can be discerned in Taylor’s discussion of the scientific literature on strychnine absorption. In 1859, Taylor put himself and the Palmer case to the forefront by acknowledging both his own authorship of “On Poisoning by Strychnia” and its roots in the trial itself (it contained, he noted, the results of experiments “which formed the basis of the evidence for the prosecution and defense in the case of The Queen v. Palmer”).92 The 1875 edition dispensed with both points of reference: an unnamed article in the Guy’s Hospital Reports for 1856 was included simply as one of a number of recent studies supportive of the proposition that strychnine’s properties made detection problematic. Palmer was erased in name, present only implicitly as a chronological trace accounting for the preponderance of studies written in 1856 and 1857 that were included in Taylor’s review of the literature. And with erasure came the semblance of objectified knowledge derived from the case, the case in this instance being fully integrated as a general set of toxicological principles.

Taylor’s teachings on the toxicological standards of proof in legal proceedings were likewise subjected to the editorial pen. His pronouncements at trial on the subject of the chemical detection of poison, as already noted, had been foreshadowed in his first edition of On Poisons. Thus, eight years before the Palmer case, Taylor had challenged what he took to be the prevailing supposition that “chemical evidence of poisoning was always necessary, and that the corpus delicti was not made out unless the poison were discovered by chemical analysis.”93 He devoted two substantial paragraphs to this topic, furnishing his readers with illustrative cases from the annals of British jurisprudence. The discussion closed with the observation that this public misconception was based on chemistry’s very real and visible successes in providing palpable proof of poisoning in cases involving otherwise weak or defective evidence.

91 Ibid., pp. 681–82.
92 Ibid., p. 76.
“We cannot therefore be surprised,” he had written in 1848, “to find that it is this branch of evidence which is deemed most satisfactory to the public mind, and which is earnestly sought for by our law authorities on charges of poisoning.”

The second edition of On Poisons retained the substance of these paragraphs but altered their appearance in two significant ways. First, they were no longer contiguous: instead, the corrective to public belief was separated from the explanation of its persistence by a two-page account of the Palmer trial as it related to the question of nondetection. It was the Palmer case, Taylor informed his readers, that was responsible for turning this public misperception into a matter of scientific controversy: “Up to the period of the trial of William Palmer for the murder of J. P. Cook (May, 1856),” Taylor began, no one “pretending to scientific knowledge” would have claimed that failure to detect poison in the lab in itself negated a charge of poisoning. The absence of traceable strychnine in the Palmer case had threatened to break this legitimate professional consensus, as defense experts made “most strenuous efforts to involve the question in the mysteries of pseudo-chemistry.” They had not succeeded, however, and thus the ultimate effect of the Palmer trial had been salutary: “It is now a well-known and admitted fact,” Taylor ventured, “that a person may die from poison, and no poison be found by chemical analysis in the body.”

At this stage, however, Taylor could not attribute the advance in both professional consensus and public understanding to the persuasive efforts of science itself. Science had in fact been rescued by the law: “It is fortunate,” Taylor observed, “that the jury in Palmer’s case have, by their verdict, given the deathblow to this novel and dangerous doctrine, and have shown that twelve men may be as safely directed to a just decision by the views of pathologists and physiologists as by the assumptions of chemists.” As a result, Taylor concluded, Palmer’s case stood in the annals of medical jurisprudence as “another illustration—that medical and moral, exclusive of chemical evidence, may suffice to procure conviction on a charge of poisoning.”

In the third edition, it was only this last reference to Palmer that remained, and even this was amended for more declarative force: Palmer’s was the “notorious” case that furnished the additional (though unnecessary) illustration that medical and moral evidence, without chemical

94 Ibid., p. 112.
96 Ibid.
97 Ibid., p. 171; emphasis added.
evidence “will suffice to procure a conviction on a charge of poisoning.”\textsuperscript{98} Gone was the discussion of the details of the Palmer case, the direct attacks on the defense experts, the plaudits to the Palmer jury. In place of contingency stood axiomatic truth, derived not as a matter of public negotiation but of scientific fact.

The third edition of On Poisons was also the last. But this did not put an end to Taylor’s standing as the most widely consulted authority on all matters of toxicology. His Principles of Medical Jurisprudence remained in print throughout his life and lived on after his death as Taylor’s Principles, revised approximately once a decade by a leading practitioner in the field. While the substance of the tome naturally changed over the years, the authoritative presence of Taylor did not: his portrait graced the frontispiece of each edition, and his organization (and often his prose) could still be discerned.\textsuperscript{99} Thus the final observation to make on the vicissitudes of closure in the scientific case against William Palmer is that, more than a century after the initial confrontation, “Taylor” continues to comment. Five times in the centenary edition of Principles Palmer is pressed into service, but from this distance the outcome is not in any doubt. The most extensive modern use of Palmer (unproblematically referred to as “the famous strychnine poisoning case”) is as a particularly egregious illustration of poor preliminary medico-legal investigation. Suspects ought not to be given the chance to tamper with postmortem evidence, is the lasting lesson of the Rugeley affair. Surely on this point “Taylor” will encounter no serious opposition.

\textsuperscript{98} Taylor, On Poisons (1875), p. 149; emphasis added.

\textsuperscript{99} Only in the thirteenth and latest edition of Taylor (appearing in 1984) did this editorial arrangement change, with fourteen separate authors writing specialized essays taking the place of Taylor’s original format, leaving only Taylor’s portrait to support the claim to authorship contained in the title. This edition was substantially reduced in size (cut from two volumes to one) and dispensed with many of the exemplary references to preceding cases—including those to The Queen v. Palmer.