

THE 'PEAR OF ANGUISH': TRUTH, TORTURE AND DARK MEDIEVALISM

ABSTRACT: This paper examines the historical truth of the 'pear of anguish' — a common exhibit in European dungeon museums that has recently made its way into the popular imagination by way of TV shows and Internet sites. Like the 'chastity belt' before it, the 'pear of anguish' evidences the 'dark medievalism' of the modern consciousness, a dystopian view of the Middle Ages that imagines pre-Reformation Europe as a nexus of cruelty and sexual perversion. The historical reality, however, traced here through commentaries and catalogues from the past few centuries, would seem to indicate that both the device itself and its imagined function are creations of the modern world.

“Ima call a coupla hard, pipe-hittin’ *****’, who’ll go to work on the homes here with a pair of pliers and a blow torch. You hear me talkin’, hillbilly boy? I ain’t through wit chu by a damn sight. Ima git *medieval* on your ass.”

Marsellus Wallace, *Pulp Fiction* (1994)

I. INTRODUCTION

Standing center-screen, his face lit against a backdrop of shadow, Marsellus glares down at his erstwhile rapist and discloses his grim intention to ‘get medieval’.¹ No one is any doubt as to what this means. Indeed, the ‘medievalism’ of the scene, and of the preceding sequence would appear to be profound.

An earlier misstep by Marsellus and his quarry, Butch Coolidge, sees the two imprisoned in the liminal world of the sadistic Zed — a world of dungeons, chains and depravity. Humans are locked in boxes, tortured for pleasure, raped at will. When Marsellus is taken into another room to face his ordeal, Butch manages to escape. He scrambles into the pawnshop above the dungeon and, after surveying a range of options (a hammer, a baseball bat, a chainsaw) he reaches up to a high shelf from which he takes down a sword. With this sword, Butch frees Marsellus and, in doing so, secures his own freedom too. Zed, however, is not to be so lucky. Following the grim evocation of the ‘medieval’ above, we leave the dungeon with Butch. Marsallus waits, hulking over the prone body of his victim.

It would be hard to imagine this scene working in a different setting — poolside for instance, or in a suburban living room. This would be too unsettling. To locate such horror in an everyday locale is to remind us of the monsters who lurk just outside our doors, and that is not entertainment. In order to distance ourselves from that anxiety, we need to transport our fears into a more distant landscape (like a dungeon) or a different temporal reality (like the Middle Ages). We can see this

disassociation operant in the décor and staff uniforms of S&M clubs, torture museums and even amusement venues like the London Dungeon.

This translocation of angst into an imagined space and time, permits us to engage with any number of fears in a safe, controlled, perhaps even enjoyable way. As an historian though, and as someone who trains teachers of history, I know that this process is not without its problems. Sometimes these dubious narratives of history that we create take on a life of their own. Sometimes they become the dominant narrative. Occasionally they become the sole narrative. In his work debunking the myth of the medieval chastity belt, Albrecht Classen warned that ‘once an idea has entered into... a reference work, it becomes impervious to critical examination and unchangeably insists on representing a factual phenomenon over many editions.’² The purpose of this paper is to engage in the same way with the contested history of the ‘pear of anguish’.

The final chapter in Carolyn Dinshaw’s *Getting Medieval* opens in exactly the same way as this paper, with a meditation upon the dungeon scene from *Pulp Fiction*, but Dinshaw argued for the forging of a ‘postidentitarian and postmedieval ethos and history’ rather than the ‘abjection of the past... and the longing for pure truth’.³ In doing so, Dinshaw sought to differentiate herself from both utopianism and from what she described as the nostalgia of Foucault’s medievalism⁴ while, at the same time, ‘touching’ the past in an effort to ‘build selves and communities now and into the future’.⁵

Despite their ideological differences, Dinshaw’s *Getting Medieval* engages closely with Foucault’s work, in particular his *History of Sexuality*, and this paper also owes no little debt to that treatise. Foucault’s thesis that the cognitive unity of the Middle Ages was broken by a ‘new regime of discourses’⁶ enforced during the early modern period will find resonance here, for it will be argued that critical

misinterpretations, indeed reimaginings, regarding the ‘pear of anguish’ took place at exactly the same time.

II. PEARS OF ANGUISH

In an episode of the television drama *Criminal Minds* that first aired 7 November 2007, a serial killer tortured his victims with ‘medieval’ implements including the ‘heretic’s fork’ and the ‘pear of anguish’.⁷ The imagined ‘medieval’ lineage of this last device was made even more explicit in an episode of another drama series, *Bones*, which first aired 19 February 2009. Here the device was used to murder a woman at a Cosplay convention so that the killer might retrieve the sword *Excalibur* (a valuable prop from a French movie version of *Le Mort d’Arthur*).⁸ The ‘pear’ also made an appearance in the suitably ‘medieval’ dungeon of the King of Naples in the first episode of the second season of *The Borgias* (8 April 2012).⁹

The inclusion of the ‘pear of anguish’ as a plot device in two major television series only 16 months apart caused a flurry on the internet. Chat rooms buzzed with a discussion of the object and websites were erected to fill in the subsequent gaps in the collective knowledge. A cursory internet search today will reveal that the term refers to a ‘medieval’ torture device, examples of which can be seen in a number of museums in Europe — the Lubuska Land Museum in Zielona Góra (Poland), the Museum der Festung in Salzburg (Austria), the Kriminalmuseum in Rothenburg (Germany), and the Museo di Criminologia in San Gimignano (Italy). A nineteenth-century catalogue held in the Louvre bears both a description and a detailed diagram of yet another ‘pear of anguish’.¹⁰

Literature from some of these museums, together with any number of website postings, will inform the inquisitive that the device was used to torture transgressors during the Middle Ages. Some sources claim it to be a tool of the Inquisition. The various ‘pears’ consists of three or four metal lobes connected at one end by a hinge.

In the earliest examples, a spring-loaded internal mechanism forces the lobes apart and a retraction of the lobes is only possible by the manipulation of the spring by means of a secondary pin. Other versions lack the spring and can only be opened or closed by means of a screw, often elaborate in its decoration.

It has been proposed that, by inserting the device into different orifices and then gradually expanding it, medieval torturers could punish the wicked according to their crime. Thus the ‘pear’, it is imagined, was forced into the mouth of a blasphemer; the vagina of a woman deemed guilty of witchcraft, adultery, prostitution or of inducing a miscarriage; or the anus of a homosexual man.¹¹

Any historian looking at such an object and reading these descriptions would remain skeptical, of course. The apparently straightforward narrative is so densely packed with anachronisms (witchcraft and homosexuality, in particular, are strongly contested terms). Moreover, modern conversations on the subject of torture are exceedingly difficult. We rightly reject the notion of torture, it is antithetical to civilization, and yet we seek loopholes in contemporary laws in order to justify our continued use of it. In medieval Europe, however, torture was an integral part of legal practice and so the conversation was forthright and precise.¹² It is impossible to imagine the ‘pear of anguish’ being inserted either vaginally or anally as part of these practices. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine the device having a place in any medieval court or Inquisition. We read of the *garrucha* (pulley), the *toca* (cloth) and the *potro* (colt), but we never read of the *pera*.

Dealers in curiosities, especially online dealers, commonly trade ‘antique’ examples of the ‘pear of anguish’ and these are invariably of dubious origin. All of the museum copies listed above — those in the Lubuska Land Museum, the Museum der Festung in Salzburg, the Kriminalmuseum in Rothenburg, and the Museo di Criminologia in San Gimignano — demonstrate no reliable provenance. Where provenance can be established — the *poire d’angoisse* of the Musée du Louvre, for

example — the device seems too finely wrought to be the tool of a torturer. The high level of decoration on the outer surfaces of the lobes of the Louvre model would indicate use by a social elite. Moreover, the turning mechanisms of all the devices are complex and elaborate and the centrality of a coiled spring to the functioning of these ‘pears’ would seem to indicate a later date for their invention — European metallurgy did not accommodate the creation of coiled springs until the fifteenth century.

Most importantly, though, the very construction of these devices would seem to belie any torturous function. It is clear that a latch at the tip of the ‘pear’ can be triggered to release the spring-loaded lobes. This latch could not be released if the pear was already inserted into something (or someone). The action of the spring once released, it is to be presumed, would not be a slow process, but rather a sudden one. The lobes are then gradually screwed back together by the use of an additional key, shown clearly as separate to the ‘pear’ in the Louvre catalogue. The device, therefore, screws closed, rather than open. The capacity for expansion is also clearly limited by internal arms within the ‘pear’ itself and this capacity is not particularly large. It is to be wondered, also, if the strength of the primitive spring would be that much greater than the force a human could bring to bear against it with their jaw (or indeed, their anal or pelvic muscles).

Upon first meeting the device then, it seems suitably infernal, but even the most superficial consideration of it as an instrument of torture would seem to reduce its utility when compared to, as Marsellus might suggest, a simple pair of pliers. So if it is not an instrument of torture, what might it be?

III. THE *POIRE D’ANGOISSE* OF PALIOLI

The Louvre *poire d’angoisse* (pear of anguish) survives in a catalogue from 1856 that details the collection of the Chevalier Sauvageot. Alexander-Charles Sauvageot

was a talented violinist who studied at the *Collège des Quatre-Nations* in Paris. In 1795, at the age of fourteen, Sauvageot was accepted into the *Conservatoire de Musique* and by 1800 he was second violin of *l'orchestre de l'Opéra*.¹³

Largely apolitical during Napoleon's regime, Sauvageot busied himself instead with the collecting of antiques. He focused initially on numismatics, but eventually widened his range to include all manner of artifacts. By the restoration of the Bourbon monarchy in 1815, his collection included a good number of musical instruments, some antique furniture, and a considerable amount of medieval and early modern art. Sauvageot's collection eventually brought him to the attention of king Louis Philippe and in 1837 he was granted a chair on the *Cabinet des Antiques* at the *Bibliothèque Royale*.¹⁴

Sauvageot continued in this role as the *Bibliothèque Royale* transitioned into the *Bibliothèque Nationale* and in 1843, he became an assistant to Prosper Mérimée, Inspector-General of Historical Monuments. In 1852, as Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte moved towards establishing the Second French Empire, Sauvageot became a member of the commission to reform the National Museum. By then in his 70s, Sauvageot determined to transfer his own considerable collection to the national holdings at the Louvre — a process that formally began in 1856, the same year he was made a Chevalier of the Legion of Honour.¹⁵

By the time of his donation, Sauvageot's collections were extensive and a catalogue was commissioned in order to register each item. Monsieur Sauzay, who compiled the catalogue, identified one object (item 593) as a *poire d'angoisse* and referred his readers to the *Histoire Générale des Larrons* (*General History of Thieves*) first published by François de Calvi in the early 17th century (although Sauzay was using a 1709 edition).¹⁶

The first volume of De Calvi's salacious bestseller had been in print from as early as 1623,¹⁷ probably printed in the Dutch Republic in order to circumvent

France's strict censorship laws. Volumes two and three appeared in 1625. Copies claiming a Parisian provenance (Rolin Baragnes) exist from 1631 and other copies from elsewhere in France (Rouen, Lyon) have also been attested from the 1630s. The three volumes were combined for the first time in 1636 and thereafter this would seem to have become the standard edition. De Calvi's name does not appear on any of these versions, the authorship of such a work would not have benefitted a chevalier, and at first it was believed that the treatise was the work of the Chevalier d'Aubrincourt. Later editions give the author as *F.D.C. Lyonnais* (F.D.C. of Lyon).

The *Histoire* relates, among many other tales, the story of a thief called Palioli, originally from Toulouse, who operated various criminal operations in Paris during the late sixteenth or early seventeenth centuries. De Calvi credits Palioli with the creation of the *poire*, an *instrument diabolique*, with which he would gag his victims before robbing them.¹⁸

According to de Calvi, Palioli commissioned one of his accomplices, a locksmith from Paris, to construct the *poire*. The device was designed to spring open upon the release of a trigger and could only be screwed closed again with the use of a purpose-made key. One could certainly see that the object in Sauzay's catalogue might work in that manner to some degree, although forcing the mouth open would hardly stifle a scream (the proposed purpose of the device) and the spring would have to be fairly strong to lock the object in place — de Calvi claims that one of Palioli's victims, a rich man called Eridas, would have starved to death had not the key been sent to him eventually. Most importantly though, it seems hard to imagine how the latch that contains the spring on the Louvre *poire* could be released once it was inserted into the victim's mouth.

There are also a few notable differences between Palioli's *poire* and the item in Sauvageot's collection. According to de Calvi, Palioli's *poire* was constructed of wood whereas the catalogue states that Sauvageot's item was iron. One would

imagine, also, that Palioli's gag was nowhere nearly as ornate in its finish as the example in the catalogue. Sauvageot's *poire* was clearly a prestige item, although that does not mean that it could not have been modeled on Palioli's earlier exemplar.

The story of Palioli, largely forgotten now it would seem, enjoyed some infamy in early modern Europe, due in part to the success of de Calvi's book. English translations of de Calvi's *Histoire* appeared in the 1630s¹⁹ and there are Dutch versions from the decade after.²⁰ Multiple reprints were commissioned throughout the 17th and 18th centuries and de Calvi was much imitated abroad — his work became a major source for popular imitations including Richard Head's *The English Rogue* (1665).

Palioli made an appearance in Jean Baptiste Gouriet's *Personnages célèbres dans les rues de Paris* published in 1811,²¹ and the third volume of *Le magasin pittoresque*, published in 1835, quoted the story of the thief and his 'abominable invention' once again.²² Interestingly, this last article misdated de Calvi's work to 1555. This is, perhaps, the moment at which the *poire d'angoisse* began its retreat into the Middle Ages.

Some two decades later, this mistake was repeated in Adolphe de Chesnel's *Dictionnaire des superstitions*. Chesnel's retelling of de Calvi's story also intensified the diabolical aspect of Palioli's invention by mentioning the belief of some that the *poire* was operated by way of magic or with 'Satanic' power — although Chesnel might also have written this in order to justify the inclusion of a popular story into what was meant to be a religious work.²³

Soon after this, Sauzay's catalogue appeared and the public was given a visual representation of this infamous device, or so it is claimed. We must remember that in approaching the artifact from Sauvageot's collection, Sauzay must have been casting about for some way in which to explain it. He knew the stories from de Calvi. It must have seemed a logical inference to draw.

A year later, in 1857, *Le magasin pittoresque* weighed in on this issue again. Reminding their readers of the article produced more than two decades before, the *magasin* presented the diagram of Sauvageot's *poire* from Sauzay's catalogue, but posited a different origin for the device. The *Histoire universelle*, written by Théodore-Agrippa d'Aubigné and published between 1616 and 1618, also featured a *poire d'angoisse*. In the third book of the *Histoire*, chapter 15, d'Aubigné credited one Captain Gaucher, a 'hard-riding soldier', with its invention. So successful was Gaucher, it seems, that sometimes he took more prisoners than he could fit into his gaols, so he had a device fashioned with which he could detain his captives. With the *poire* screwed into their mouths, its end presumably fastened to something else, Captain Gaucher had no need of 'ropes or clubs'.²⁴ This story, of course, seems even more absurd than de Calvi's, but the editor of the *magasin* assured his readers, perhaps a bit facetiously, of the unimpeachable veracity of d'Aubigné's *Histoire*.²⁵

Six years after that, in 1863, a review in the London-based *Archaeological Journal* referenced both de Calvi's *Histoire* and Sauzay's catalogue,²⁶ and, in 1865, a writer for the *Dublin University Magazine* knew de Calvi well enough to quote his tale of Palioli.²⁷ Details in the Irish magazine are scarce, but the *Archaeological Journal* is interesting as it indicates another critical development in the story of Palioli's *poire*.

IV. THE BOSTON 'CHOKE-PEAR'

Reviewing the 1862 publication of J.H. von Hefner-Alteneck's *Eisenwerke oder Ornamentik der Schmiedekunst des Mittelalters und der Renaissance*, a writer for the *Archaeological Journal* informed their readers that one of the devices detailed by Hefner-Alteneck (in fact, the item still on display today in the *Kriminalmuseum* in Rothenburg ob der Tauber) was an example of Palioli's 'infernal' gag. Like Gouriet, the review located the origins of the 'atrocious device' squarely in the sixteenth

century and argued for its use as an instrument of torture. Forced into the ‘mouth of a victim while under torture’ the gag could be ‘gradually’ opened ‘by means of an enclosed screw’.²⁸

This is the point, then, at which a curiosity is being transformed into something much more nefarious. No longer the unique prototype of a singularly depraved mind, by the 1860s the ‘pear’ has become a member of a darker taxon. By misconstruing the function of the device itself and by mistaking the key that unlocks it as a screw to manipulate it, the emphasis of operation has shifted away from a purely mechanical function, to the slow and deliberate application of pain. In this taxonomy, the ‘pear’ can only be used to torture. Of course, not everyone who encountered Palioli’s *poire* was quite so impressed.

During the last decades of the 19th century, Benjamin Eldridge and William Watts were lawmen in Boston, a city that had grown from a population of some 46,000 at its incorporation in 1822 to more than 560,000 by the end of the century. At the height of the Depression in the 1890s, Boston was rigidly divided into ethnically distinct boroughs — the Irish in the south, Russian Jews in the west and Italians in the north. Poverty was endemic, crime was rife and Eldridge, as Superintendent of Police, and Watts, as Chief Inspector of Detectives, were charged with keeping the law.

Our Rival the Rascal, written by Eldridge and Watts towards the end of their careers, is an engaging treatise from the Gilded Age. The lawmen draw classical references from their ongoing battles with criminals who rejoice in such names as Kid Johnson, English Harry, Frisco Slim and Sheeny Si. They also compare the *modus operandi* of their hometown *rascals* with those of criminals from other countries and eras. For Eldridge and Watts, the *poire d’angoisse* of de Calvi was reminiscent of the ‘choke-pear’ of their own day.

Francis Grose published his *Lexicon Balatronicum* in 1811. Literally a ‘Lexicon for Fool’s’, the book became more commonly known as *The Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* and presented for the reader, in the words of its subtitle, an array of ‘Buckish Slang, University Wit and Pickpocket Eloquence’. We know from Grose that ‘choak pear’ (sic.) had entered the argot of the street by this time and meant ‘an unanswerable objection’.²⁹ The term does not seem to have been particularly widespread before the 19th century — Henry Cotton’s *Gazetteer* mentions a pamphlet entitled *A Choke-pear for the Parliament* printed during the siege of Colchester in 1648,³⁰ but the fifth edition of Nathan Bailey’s *New Universal Etymological English Dictionary*, published in 1775, makes no mention of the phrase.³¹ We know also, from Ebenezer Brewer’s *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, that the expression was still in use and still meant the same thing (‘an argument to which there is no answer’) in the late 19th century, although the spelling had changed (or reverted) to ‘choke-pear’.³²

The denizens of the Boston underworld, taking the phrase more literally perhaps, had also suborned the term to mean a simple gag, sewn into a pear shape and stuffed with rags. Eldridge and Watts conceded that the ‘choke-pears’ with which they were familiar were ‘far less marvelous and dangerous’ than Palioli’s invention, but they wondered also if the *poire d’angoisse* had ever ‘existed outside of de Calvi’s head’.³³ One wonders if the skepticism of Eldridge and Watts, as seasoned lawmen in a tough city, might not be worth noting. Crude as the Boston ‘choke-pear’ may have been, it would seem far more likely to silence its victim than would Palioli’s contraption.

This conflation of the 16th century *poire d’angoisse* and the 19th century ‘choke-pear’ becomes even more complex as we analyze both Brewer’s and Grose’s dictionaries more closely. Grose wrote that a ‘choak pear’ was also:

‘... a machine formerly used in Holland by robbers; it was of iron, shaped like a pear; this they forced into the mouths of persons from whom they intended to extort money; and on turning a key, certain interior springs

thrust forth a number of points, in all directions, which so enlarged it, that it could not be taken out of the mouth: and the iron, being case-hardened, could not be filed: the only methods of getting rid of it, were either by cutting the mouth, or advertizing a reward for the key. These pears were also called pears of agony.’³⁴

The entry in Brewer’s dictionary is much the same. Brewer, no doubt, used Grose as his source, but Grose’s work was original. One wonders if he might not have been working from one of the many Dutch translations of de Calvi.

V. DARK DESIRES

It is no accident that Brewer’s reference coincides with the publication of the book by Eldridge and Watts, or that the exhibition of torture devices reviewed in the *Archaeological Journal* followed so quickly upon the publication of the original *poire* in Sauzay’s catalogue. The last half of the 19th century witnessed an unprecedented heightening of interest in all manner of grisly subjects, including torture, and entrepreneurs scrambled to satisfy these new tastes. Experts authored books, artists produced prints, collectors sold antiques and comen, of course, manufactured fakes.

One of the aficionados of the macabre in late-Victorian Britain was Charles Chetwynd-Talbot, the 20th Earl of Shrewsbury, the 20th Earl of Waterford, and the 5th Earl Talbot. Shrewsbury, the premier Earl of England, caused a scandal in 1880 when he ran off with Ellen Mundy, wife of the Shipley Colliery owner Alfred Mundy. Fleeing England, Shrewsbury and Mrs. Mundy were later joined aboard a yacht in the Mediterranean by Ellen’s younger brothers George, Alfred and William. The three young aristocrats had apparently conspired to kill their eldest brother, Charles Palmer-Morewood, on Christmas Day in 1881. Charles had refused to share an inheritance with them, so he was pistol-whipped, stripped naked and left lying ‘in a pool of blood’ and his three brothers, quickly posting bail, fled for the continent.³⁵

Following her divorce from Mundy, Ellen did marry Shrewsbury, but the two had separated by 1896. By then, however, Shrewsbury had a new obsession.

During his frequent trips to the continent, Shrewsbury began collecting instruments of torture. So famous did his collection become, that he was asked to exhibit it at the World's Fair in Chicago in 1893. The Fair was organized as part of an America-wide celebration of the 400th anniversary of Columbus' arrival in the New World and, after the fair, Shrewsbury's exhibits toured the States.³⁶ Of the many items in Shrewsbury's collection, perhaps none was as famous as the *Eiserne Jungfrau* (the Iron Maiden) of Nurnberg.

The young earl had bought the *Jungfrau* in 1890, through Ichenhauser's of London. The device, considered by so many still as the archetypal 'medieval' artifact, consisted of an anthropomorphic cabinet with two hinged doors at the front. The inside panels of both the doors, and the surface of the cabinet facing them, were lined with iron spikes and it was purported to Shrewsbury that victims of the Inquisition were placed inside the *Jungfrau* and the doors forced shut. Pierced by the metal and locked inside the cabinet, the victims suffered a slow and agonizing death. The device was, of course, an egregious forgery.

The *Eiserne Jungfrau* appears in no historical document published before the early 1790s. It was at this time that a fictitious history was created, probably by the German philosopher Johann Philipp Siebenkees. That the *Jungfrau* was a counterfeit has been acknowledged in Europe since at least the 1920s,³⁷ and by the 1930s it was also common knowledge in Asia and America.³⁸ It is now believed that Shrewsbury's Iron Maiden was constructed in 1867,³⁹ although there is no reason to believe that he himself knew it to be a fake. It was at the height of this trade in counterfeits, also, that new 'pears of anguish' began to circulate on the market.

It seems reasonable to believe that Sauvageot's *poire* was already antique when it came into his possession, and the specimen in the *Kriminalmuseum* in Rothenburg

seems similar to Sauvageot's in both form and function. Other examples that appeared on the market during the later half of the 19th century, however, had neither the elegance nor the utility of either of these two models. Even today, any number of torture museums in Europe display heavy, poorly crafted 'pears'. Many of these versions evidence hammer blows or casting lines, something altogether absent in either the Louvre or the *Kriminalmuseum* variants, and many are missing the complex spring mechanisms from within them.

For some, the spring may have perished over time, although that seems difficult to believe. For many, though, it would appear that the springs had never been present and that the 'pears' were actually screwed *open*, rather than *closed*, even though this would seem to disagree with the documentary evidence that survives, meagre as it is. All the mechanisms have restraining arms, however, and none can open particularly wide. None would really stop someone from screaming and most would not do too much damage no matter where they were inserted. More importantly, some are of very modern manufacture.

The nineteenth-century fascination for medieval torture equipment led to a boom in the production of counterfeit items, but this trade did not finish there. By the turn of the twentieth-century, 'pears of anguish', no less than iron maidens, chastity belts, thumbscrews and racks were in high demand. The machining apparent on some museum pieces readily betrays their recent manufacture, as does the use of animal waste solvents to produce a suitably aged patina. Some models are even made from very modern, high-carbon steel.

VI. CONCLUSION

For scholars who work in pre-modern European history, the burden of the dungeon and the torture-chamber is, at times, an onerous one. The Middle Ages is a time-scape in which any excess can be imagined, in which any cruelty might seem

credible. That modern minds could construct such a violent history for this ambiguous artifact, and that modern audiences could so readily embrace this construct, demonstrates the powerful historical proclivity of ‘dark medievalism’. For some, the European Middle Ages was a time of slavish adherence to obsolete philosophies and the perpetuation of a cruel, uncivilized and primitive culture. This dystopian view of medievalism is most evident in analyses that embrace a narrative of human progress and emphasize the ‘March of History’. Self-consciously ‘modern’ and ‘scientific’, dark medievalism impacts powerfully on the creative arts as well — it is the genius behind the lurid tales of the dungeon, the torture-chamber, the immured nun and the rat-borne plague.

By overlooking the scientific, philosophical and architectural achievements of medieval scholars, and by refusing to acknowledge the interconnectedness of modern, medieval and classical Europe, dark medievalism promotes a distinctive and singular construction of history that bleeds into the popular consciousness. It is in such a climate that the *poire d’angoisse* transforms from a curiosity into an infernal device.

There are very few genuine examples of a *poire d’angoisse* from which to build our analysis. We have no clear statement as to what these items might have been, only a connection drawn between an obscure exhibit in a 19th century collection and a spurious *Histoire* from two centuries before. That connection having been made, all subsequent sources agreed, and before long a sham industry was established which simultaneously fed off and reinforced the hypothesis by fabricating and retailing new ‘artifacts’. The maladroit reproductions that populate the more tawdry museums can tell us nothing about the origins or purpose of the originals. They are indicative only of our own dark desires and secret fears.

We can say that the original devices themselves could not pre-date the 16th century and are, in all likelihood, younger even than that. Despite numerous

attempts to do so, they cannot be considered ‘medieval’. They are, in every way, very modern inventions.

Certainly they were not used for torture. They are far too elegant and made with too much care for that. One could imagine them as surgical instruments — some sort of speculum perhaps, or a device for levering open the mouth in order that a dentist might operate. But then they could just as easily be shoe-extenders, or sock-stretchers, or glove-wideners.

The operation of the latch would seem to suggest that the device must be unfettered when the spring is activated. Perhaps the hollow internal cavity is for holding hot charcoal. The spoon-like lobes of the *poire* could be used to scoop up warm embers before the device is screwed closed and inserted into a shoe, or a sock, or a glove in order to warm it. Removed from the warmed piece of clothing, the *poire* was held over the fire, the latch released and the dead embers ejected. This is mere conjecture, of course.

It is not impossible that Sauvageot’s *poire* may have been used as a gag, although I, like Eldridge and Watts, find that difficult to believe. Perhaps, and this seems more likely, Sauvageot’s *poire* was constructed after the fact in accordance with the outlandish stories published in the scandalous, and highly popular, *Histoires* of de Calvi and d’Aubigné. The ornate nature of the genuine pieces that survive certainly indicate their commission by elite individuals and it is easy to imagine the courtiers of the Bourbon monarchs purchasing and fetishizing such illicit objects — black-jacks and brass-knuckles made by craftsmen and finished in marcasite. It would not be too difficult, either, to imagine such devices being put to more erotic pursuits.

Certainly, the modern interpretation has revolved around the insertion of these phallic objects into various orifices. We know that similar preoccupations obsessed some members of the elite echelons of eighteenth-century France, social strata

renowned for their decadence and obsession with pornography. De Sade, unfortunately remains silent on the *poire d'angoisse*, but that does not mean that he did not know of its use.

If this last conjecture seems too fanciful, one needs only extend one's Internet search a bit further than the first page of websites returned for 'pear of anguish'. After several pages of the *poire d'angoisse* as a medieval torture device, you will pass through a series of pages featuring rock bands of various ilks, until you eventually come to the fetish pages. There you will see modern 'pears', designed for the BDSM market (bondage, dominance, sadism, masochism) and manufactured in 'easy to clean' stainless steel. All available for purchase with a non-specific receipt, discrete shipping guaranteed.

ENDNOTES

¹ Quentin Tarantino (Dir.), *Pulp Fiction* (New York: Miramax, 1994).

² Albrecht Classen, *The Medieval Chastity Belt: A Myth-Making Process* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 15–16.

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⁴ Dinshaw, *Getting Medieval*, pp. 199–200.

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¹³ Suazay, *Catalogue du Musee Sauvageot*, pp. v–vi.

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¹⁷ Frank Wadleigh Chandler, *The Literature of Roguery* (Cambridge MA: Riverside Press, 1907), Vol. 1, pp. 17–18.

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- ²⁴ “Poire d’angoisse” in Édouard Charton (Ed.), *Le magasin pittoresque* (Paris, 1857), Vol. 25, pp. 215–216.
- ²⁵ Wikipedia has managed to settle the debate as to the instrument’s progenitor by conflating the two candidates into one and crediting its invention to a “Capitaine Gaucherou de Palioly”. See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Choke_pear_\(torture\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Choke_pear_(torture))
- ²⁶ “Review of J.H. von Hefner-Alteneck’s *Eisenwerke oder Ornamentik der Schmiedekunst des Mittelalters und der Renaissance*” in *The Archaeological Journal* (vol. 20, March 1863), pp. 79–82.
- ²⁷ “Minions of the Moon, Ancient and Modern” in *Dublin University Magazine* (No. 392: Vol. 66, August 1865), pp. 146–161, pp. 153–154.
- ²⁸ Review of von Hefner-Alteneck, *Archaeological Journal*, p. 82.
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- ³⁵ J.H., *Strange British Crime* (The New York Times, January 29, 1882).

³⁶ “Famous Torture Devices” in *The New York Times* (November 26, 1893).

³⁷ Jacob Tanner, “Stoff und Form. Menschliche Selbsthervorbringung, Geschlechterdualismus und die Widerständigkeit der Materie” in Barbara Naumann, Thomas Strässle, Caroline Torra-Mattenklott (Eds), *Stoffe: zur Geschichte der Materialität in Künsten und Wissenschaften* (Zürich: Vdf Hochschulverlag AG, 2006), pp. 83 – 108, p. 102.

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