The Sin-Eater: ritual and representation in a hypermodern world

Helen Frisby, Centre for Death and Society, University of Bath

Introduction

Gilles Lipovetsky (2005) contends that the 'Western' world is transitioning from modernity to a 'hypermodern' world that presents individuals with unprecedented opportunities for pleasure, self-expression and self-fulfilment. Hypermodernity is, or is in the process of becoming, a dynamic society, characterised by fluidity and flexibility, that is either (depending upon political persuasion) liberated or deracinated from the great modern structuring principles of modernity such as family, community, government and Church. Such freedom can be exhilarating for the individual, but minimal social and/or economic support is available when things go wrong. Thus, far from enjoying unalloyed pleasure, in practice the hypermodern individual exists in a state of chronic anxiety (Lipovetsky 2005: 39, 45). Here, in a wide-ranging discussion the breadth of which itself highlights the sheer volume and range of sin-eater representations in contemporary popular culture, I suggest that the sin-eater's sudden revival in novels, in film and on television since c.1980 (Lipovetsky 38) is no coincidence. Indeed, it is their very historical obscurity which renders them an ideal vehicle for the creative expression and exploration of such present-day anxieties. The first half of this article therefore offers a traditional historical analysis of the documentary record on sin-eaters and sin-eating, which establishes what we do and do not know about the sin-eater as an historical figure. In an approach itself embodying hypermodern conceptions of historical practice (Lipovetsky 67), I then turn to explore how gaps and contradictions in the historical record have been filled with creative explorations of both the positive and negative consequences of living in a hypermodern world. Firstly, would complete 'liberation' from the social, emotional and/or spiritual ties of family, community, Church and so forth really be practicable or even desirable?

Secondly, can and how should one navigate the tension between the aforementioned hypermodern values on the one hand, and on the other the institutional structures of high modernity which in practice still, to some degree, do influence an institutional destiny? And finally, in a world increasingly saturated with information, what is the emotional impact upon individuals of knowledge of the darker aspects of life? Cultural productions of sin-eaters offer diverse answers to these questions, and I conclude that it is the sin-eater's very obscurity as an historical personage that makes him or her the ideal cipher for such hypermodern dilemmas.

Historical evidence

While sin-eating as a practice is evidenced in the British Isles during the period c.1680-1900, and broad agreement exists upon the form of the ritual, this evidence is fragmented, contradictory and contested in nature. The period c.1840-c.1920 witnessed a surge of scholarly interest in the beliefs and customs of 'the common people.' These customs included sin-eating, as described by Brewer's *Dictionary of Phrase & Fable*:

> Poor people hired at funerals in olden days to eat beside the corpse and so take upon themselves the sins of the deceased, that the soul might be delivered from Purgatory. In Carmarthenshire the sin-eater used to rest a plate of salt on the breast of the deceased and place a piece of bread on the salt. After saying an incantation over the bread, the sin-eater consumed it and with it the sins of the dead ([1870] 2012: 1240).

The evidence for sin-eating from this period initially appears copious. Correspondents of *Folklore* journal, the *Academy* and other contemporary antiquarian/folklore publications enthusiastically cite current and historic examples of international customs the authors believed to be analogues of sin-eating, together with instances from the British Isles of popular funerary customs posited variously as precedents or survivals thereof. With these were proffered assorted origin-theories for sin-eating, ranging from the Classical world to that of the Old

Testament[1] to the pre-Reformation soul-mass and doling to alleged 'primitive', 'pagan' or 'heathen' pre-Christian and even anthropophagic funerary rites (Brand, 1841: 152; Symons, 1852; Leeper, 1852; Napier, 1879: 61; Burne, 1883: 306; Gomme, 1892: 116-120; Hartland, 1892; Godden, 1892; Hope, 1893; Vaux, 1894: 140-141; Hartland, 1895a&c; Owen, 1895b&c; Hartland, 1896a-d; Owen, 1896a&b; Addy, 1896a&b; Thomas, 1896b&c; Burne, 1912; Hartland, 1917; Frazer, [1922] 1998: 567-606; Berkeley, 1923). Despite the vigour and frequent vim of these debates, Victorian folklorists however consistently failed to provide definitive proof of their conjectures.

The earliest known attestation of sin-eating is a footnote in *Brand's Antiquities* concerning 'Llanggors, where Mr Gwin, the minister, about 1640, could not hinder the performance of this ancient custome' (1841: 152). This brief 'external observation, flatly represented' (Hutton 1995: 113) is typical of antiquarian/folkloric sources generally, with the consequent lack of external verifiability being a major problem of this type of historical evidence. Nonetheless, as noted by Ronald Hutton, these accounts tend at least to reach a consensus, and ultimately 'there seems to have been no reason for the authors to have invented or distorted the data which they set down' (1995: 113). The second such source, and one of the most detailed accounts of sin-eating to have survived, is that by John Aubrey:

> In the County of Hereford was an old Custome at funeralls to have poor people, who were to take upon themselves all the sinnes of the party deceased. One of them I remember lived in a cottage on Rosse-high way. (He was a long, leane, ugly, lamentable poor raskal.) The manner was that when the corps was brought out of the house and layd on the Biere; a Loafe of bread was brought out, and delivered to the Sinne-eater over the corps, as also a Mazar-bowle of maple (Gossips bowle) full of beer, wch he was to drinke up, and sixpence in money, in consideration whereof he tooke upon him (ipso facto) all the Sinnes of the Defunct, and freed him (or her) from walking after they were dead (Aubrey, [1686-87[2]] 1881: 35).

While some later folklorists would question Aubrey's reliability[3], most were content merely to repeat his assertions, giving the impression that the custom persisted unchanged a century and more later. Another early (and again not uncontested[4]) source much recycled by Victorian folklorists was Thomas Bagford's 1714-15[5] account:

> Within the memory of our fathers, in Shropshire […] when a person dyed, there was notice given to an old Sire, (for so they call'd him,) who presently repair'd to the place where the deceased lay and stood before the Door of the House, when some of the Family came out and furnished him with a Cricket on which he sat facing the Door. Then they gave him a Groat, which he put in his Pocket; a Crust of Bread, which he eat; and a full Bowle of Ale, which he drank off at a draught. After this he got up from the Cricket and pronounced, with a composed gesture, The ease and rest of the Soul departed, for which he would pawn his own Soul (Leland 1770: 76).

Finally, there is Thomas Pennant's account – which according to Hartland (1895a: 388) possibly drew upon and embellished an anonymous c.1730 MS account (British Magazine 1835) – from his travels in Wales:

> Previous to a funeral, it was customary, when the corpse was brought out of the house and laid upon the bier, for the next of kin, be it widow, mother, sister or daughter (for it must be a female), to give, over the coffin, a quantity of white loaves, in a great dish, and sometimes a cheese, with a piece of money stuck in it, to certain poor persons. After that they presented, in the same manner, a cup of drink, and required the person to drink a little of it immediately. When that was done, they kneeled down, and the minister, if present, said the Lord's Prayer (Pennant [1770] 1883: 150).

These early sources consistently use masculine pronouns to identify the sin-eater. There is, however, one known instance of a female sin-eater: a woman at Little Ouse in the Fens around the mid-nineteenth century. This woman reportedly went to some lengths to qualify for the role, taking an overdose of poppy-tea to feign a terminal coma. Having received absolution she 'recovered', now – in a striking echo of the medieval belief that people in this position were set apart from normal life (Duffy 313) – able to take the sins of others upon herself without endangering her own soul (Porter 115).

Downes (235[6]) agrees with Bagford that the sin-eater visited while the deceased was lain out at home. However, most other antiquarian sources agree that sin-eating took place as part of the funeral ceremonial, and that it was performed outside the front door before the cortege's departure. Only the Pennant/St Asaph account mentions any official ecclesiastical presence (Pennant [1770] 1883): 150; *The British Magazine* 1835: 400). Conversely, two accounts dating from the mid-late nineteenth century, and both from the east of England, indicate that there, rather than being given to a designated individual who performed sin-eating for a living, the bread and salt were left on the corpse for a while, then given to anyone who could be persuaded or even tricked into consuming them. One account notes 'a tramp of rationalist outlook who would eat any amount of sin-bread at one shilling a piece!' (Linton Smith 1940; see also Newman 1945).

Historical consensus as to which foods and drinks were employed in the sin-eating ritual is also lacking. All mention bread, Aubrey, Bagford and the anonymous author of a piece on North Walian traditions in *Blackwood's Magazine* (Anon 1875[7]) also mention ale or beer, and the latter says that milk was an alternative. The St Aspah MS/Pennant specifies 'a new wooden cup of drink' and is the only account to mention cheese, while P. Roberts' illustration (1815) depicts a glass of red liquid – most likely wine.[8] Others, including the Llandebie case described by Matthew Moggridge (Cambrian Archaeological Society 1852: 330[9]), states that bread and salt but no drinks were offered. Moggridge, and from the west of Scotland Napier (1879: 60), both note that the sin-eaters themselves placed the items on the corpse's chest. From the east of England, Linton Smith, Newman and Porter all state that the bread (and, according to Newman and Porter, salt) were laid upon either the corpse's chest or the shroud, but do not specify whether this was done by the sin-eater or somebody else. However Bagford and the St Asaph MS/Pennant specify that the food and/or drink was passed over the coffin by a relative of the deceased, the latter noting that this relative was always female. Roberts'

illustration shows a young woman performing this action and the sin-eater kneeling –a gesture not mentioned in any written sources, so possibly included by the illustrator for dramatic effect.

The subsequent stages of the ritual are also not entirely certain. While in some cases the sin-eater was required to consume everything offered immediately, the St Asaph's MS/Pennant account notes that only a token amount was required to be consumed. Several sources mention a prayer or incantation being uttered by the sin-eater, but only Bagford specifies the words '[for] the ease and rest of the Soul departed, for which I pawn my own Soul.' Of those historical sources which detail the payment, there is no clear pattern in the amounts even when adjusted for inflation over time.[10] For instance, Aubrey gives 6d (£2.86 in 2017 values) ([1686-87] 1881: 35) while Bagford specifies one groat (4d) (£1.96) (1770: 76). According to Moggridge the sin-eater was paid 2s 6d (£10.00) (1852: 330) while Linton Smith notes 1s (£3.91) (1940: 296).

While sin-eaters were usually outsiders in their communities, sources also vary regarding the degree of actual violence shown to them. Moggridge notes how, when the ceremony was over, the sin-eater

> vanished as quickly as possible from the general gaze; for, as it was believed that he really appropriated to his own use and behoof the sins of all those over whom he performed the above ceremony, he was utterly detested in the neighbourhood – regarded as a mere Pariah – as one irredeemably lost (Cambrian Archaeological Society 330).

Writing some thirty years later of the same district, Paxton Hood went further:

> Having received [his fee], he vanished as quickly as possible, all the friends and relatives of the departed aiding his exit with blows and kicks, and other indications of their faith in the service he had rendered (Paxton Hood 23).

However, a local Congregational minister informed *Christian World* readers in February 1882 that '[s]ome octogenarians whom I have questioned had never seen a sin-eater, neither have they heard their parents nor their grandparents refer to this custom' (Thomas, 1895). Therefore, while the above accounts appear to support the general impression that sin-eaters were typically outsiders in their communities, it is difficult confidently to conclude whether the ceremony really did (always or even often) end with such displays of outright physical violence toward the sin-eater.

The case of Richard Munslow of Ratlinghope in Shropshire, England's last-known sin-eater, is atypical in some significant respects. Not only is his name known, but Munslow was a doctor - and therefore, unlike most other known sin-eaters, a respectable community figure. Nothing, however, is known about the form of ritual he used, nor for whom nor how many times he performed it. The documentary trail on sin-eaters – such as it is anyway – thereby goes cold with Munslow's death in 1906, and thus the historian of sin-eating must admit defeat.

Or must they entirely? As Karin Kvideland (1984: 29) notes, gaps in the historical record have captured the imaginations of fiction writers; indeed, at the time of Munslow's death history and fiction were already merging, notably in Fiona McLeod's quasi-historical *The Sin-Eater and Other Tales and Episodes* (1895)[11]. Mary Webb's *Precious Bane* (discussed below) is another early creative exploitation of the above demonstrated, just-about critical mass of more-or-less reliable evidence concerning sin-eaters as historical figures.[12] However it was not until the mid-1980s that sin-eaters would appear in popular cultural productions with frequency, which begs the questions of *why* sin-eaters and their activities should suddenly become so appealing at that particular point in time. Chronologically this burgeoning coincides strikingly with the first stirrings of hypermodernity as identified by Lipovetsky (2005: 38), and for the following reasons it is this author's contention that these two phenomena are connected.

Firstly, what is known of sin-eaters and their activities confers historical legitimacy on the struggles of present-day individuals who also find themselves relegated to the socio-economic margins because of the essential, but unpleasant social services they perform for a living. Most (but not all) of the historical sin-eaters discussed above appear to have been loners, and only Munslow even has a recorded name. Summarily recalled back to the fold when their services were needed and ejected promptly afterward, sometimes with outright violence, sin-eaters remain relatable to many in occupations nowadays who possess the skills/are willing to perform the unpleasant services required for social functioning, but are otherwise barely tolerated by polite society precisely because they do so.

Secondly, the historical record offers models for the strategies marginal individuals might employ in order to navigate the emotionally challenging position of being needed, while simultaneously rejected by mainstream society. So far as can be ascertained, some historical sin-eaters simply accepted and eked out a precarious existence as best they could, unable or unwilling fully to deracinate themselves from social, material and emotional ties, and perhaps hopeful of eventual rehabilitation. However, others such as the Little Ouse sin-eater who went so far as to feign death in order to obtain the role (Porter 115), or the tramp of rationalist outlook who would eat any amount of sin-bread at one shilling a piece' (Linton Smith 1940), appear actively to have embraced, even sought, their marginal, precarious existences as a price worth paying for liberty from mainstream institutional constraints. All of these strategies and outcomes are illustrated across the range of cultural productions discussed below.

Finally, like sin-eaters bearing the emotional and moral burden of knowing all their clients' sins, hypermodern individuals inhabit a world increasingly saturated with information, some of which is disturbing, and once known cannot be unknown. Individuals must therefore choose whether to embrace this as the cost of participation as the functions of daily living

increasingly move online, or to metaphorically and literally switch off, accepting the material and social costs of non-participation as a price worth paying for innocence.

To explore such profound questions through the decidedly popular cultural productions discussed below may seem incongruous. However Pencefold-Mounce (2018: 2-5, 94, 115-118) argues that scholars wishing to understand the human condition should treat the 'glossy' seriously, as everyday myths about what it means to live and die in this world. Thus it is that the documentary record concerning sin-eaters, troublesome and ultimately a dead end from a purely historical perspective, becomes instead the springboard for creative, dramatic 'morbid spaces' (Pencefold-Mounce 2018: 63-86, 112-155) enabling their consumers to work through some of the practical, emotional and moral dilemmas and tensions engendered as their lived worlds transition from modernity to hypermodernity. This has included the restoration of Munslow's grave as a tourist attraction (BBC, 2010).

Destiny, institutions, and agency

In foregrounding the power of individuals to achieve self-realisation though a process of self-determination and self-questioning (Lipovetsky 2005: 64-5), there is an inherent assumption that everyone possess sufficient social and economic agency for such choices even to be possible. Like their historical antecedents, some latter-day fictional sin-eaters choose their role, while others are manipulated or even forced into it; some eventually escape by narratively conventional means, while others find (varying degrees of) agency and meaning within the very bonds of destiny.

The latter conclusion is particularly prominent in *The Order* (Brian Helgeland (Director), Twentieth Century Fox, 2003)[13], in which maverick New York Catholic priest Alex Bernier is summoned to Rome by senior Vatican official Driscoll. Ostensibly, this summons is

to investigate his Head of Order's suspicious death; unbeknownst to Alex, however, he has long been earmarked as the next sin-eater. The film follows Alex's journey of emotional and spiritual awakening as he initially resists, then finally embraces this destiny. Along the way an origin-narrative that the first sin-eaters were renegade members of Alex's very own (fictional) order, who exercised personal agency by absolving dying sinners rejected by the Church, is provided. Writer/director Brian Helgeland states in the director's commentary that he was originally inspired by the *Brewer's* sin-eating description (above), not merely for the framework it provided, but equally for the creative potential he perceived within its gaps for the dramatisation of his hero's journey toward self-determination. Such changes and interpolations include sin-eating at the deathbed rather than post-mortem; the use of Aramaic associating the sin-eater with Christ; and CGI animation depicting the sins themselves as jellyfish-like creatures clawing their way out of the decedent's body and into that of the sin-eater.

Also manipulating Alex toward his destiny is William Eden, the half millennium-old 'mephistophelean' (Holden, 2003) sin-eater who wishes to retire. So determined is Eden that he even kills Alex's lover, Mara, to make Alex remain in the priesthood. However, Eden is not a straightforward villain: in the director's commentary, Helgeland states that he included the extended flashback to Eden's own backstory of becoming a sin-eater to provoke consideration of whether villains are merely flawed individuals trying their best in an evermore complicated and contested world. As Alex finally confronts and kills Eden, five hundred years' worth of accumulated sins transfer to Alex in a bellowing, monstrous tirade. The film's closing scenes chart Alex's realisation that he alone now possesses the choice of whether to accept the sins with which he is presented, giving him power over whether the deceased are saved or condemned.[14] Called to perform his services for Driscoll – revealed as the 'Black Pope' of the film's subplot, and about to commit suicide – Alex instead decides to force Driscoll literally to

consume his own, including this final, and in Catholic belief most damning of, sins. Afterward Alex walks away, confidence and poise burgeoning as he states that

> now it is I, I have been blessed and cursed. For now I possess the keys to the kingdom of heaven, I will forgive those who deserve freedom. I will damn those who've damned themselves, I will learn to live after love has died. I am the Sin Eater (*The Order*, 2003).

The film thereby endorses hypermodern values insofar as it is not institutions, but rather the lone individual, operating nimbly and knowingly at the margins, who is best placed to judge others. However, 'I will learn to live after love has died' is a poignant reminder that Alex has only reached this place by eschewing participation in human, and specifically romantic, relationships. Thus, while individual agency may be a hypermodern ideal, here it comes at the high price of social and emotional belonging Another fictional sin-eater wrestling with destiny, and ultimately finding their own brand of personal agency, is May Owens in Megan Campesi's novel *The Sin-Eater*. May is arrested for stealing a loaf of bread, thus resembling some historical sin-eaters in undertaking the role through economic necessity. However, from here the fictional narrative takes over as, by way of punishment, May is 'made' into a sin-eater. Referencing Eve's sin in the garden of Eden and the consequent suffering by all woman thereafter, May's tongue is branded with a snake tattoo and she is fitted with a metal collar engraved with an S (Campesi 2020, 25-27). Shunned thereafter, May struggles to accept her situation until called to conduct a sin-eating at the very heart of the royal court. A murder ensues and, in resolving the mystery, May undergoes an individualist realisation (Chicago Review of Books, 2020) very similar to that of Alex Bernier above – although, unlike Alex, she remains open to the possibility of further social relations in a future beyond the novel (Campesi 2020: 350).

Another modern social institution that functions as simultaneously refuge and source of pain to the hypermodern individual is the family (Lipovetsky 2005: 48, 55-56, 68). In *The*

Master of Ballantrae (Douglas Hickox (Director), Columbia Pictures Television/HTV/Hallmark, 1984) a sin-eating scene combines creative licence with historical, and indeed its own fictional sources[15] dramatically to express and explore the strains thus produced. Living in Scotland during the Jacobite uprising, the Durie family decides strategically to spread its loyalties between Jacobites and Crown; thus, upon the toss of a coin, unpleasant but more glamorous and favoured older brother Jamie goes to aid the rebellion, while plain but dutiful younger brother Henry remains at home supporting the Government. The 1984 film's sin-eating sequence begins with their father the Old Lord mistaking Henry for Jamie on his deathbed. The old man's final words, as he physically turns away from Henry, are: 'where is my son?' The film then cuts directly to the sin-eating itself. Proffering payment with the same coin previously employed to divide the two brothers, Henry asks whether his father's favoritism is forgiveable. The sin-eater affirms so, and tells Henry that if he cannot forgive it, 'then it is your soul which must be cleansed' (*The Master of Ballantrae* 1984). Thus, it is down to Henry as an individual to reconcile the hypermodern family's paradoxical role as both constrainer of individual freedom and desire, and cradle of material security and existential belonging.

Roots and belonging

Henry Durie, Alex Bernier and May Owens are all outsiders: Henry within his own family, Alex as an exorcist, and May as an impoverished orphan. In this respect, fiction mirrors history, in which most sin-eaters lacked social relations or even identity: the 'ugly, lamentable poor raskal' who 'lived in a cottage on Rosse-high way' (Aubrey, [1686-87] 1881: 35) beyond the boundaries of the community he served. Richard Munslow excepted, even the names of most historical sin-eaters' were unrecorded; they are nearly always merely called 'the sin-eater'. Such lack of social roots or ties, and the question of what it would really be like to live

those hypermodern values to the full, proves a fertile avenue for exploration by several of the sin-eater themed cultural productions considered here.

The sin-eater's anonymity in *The Master of Ballentrae* directly inspired Irish-American funeral director Thomas Lynch to create Argyle the sin-eater for his poetry collection *The Sin Eater: A Breviary* (Lynch 2012: 15-16). Argyle's name itself, with its acoustic resemblance to 'our guile', highlights the character's Everyman function (Foster 2012), living a relatably mixed emotional and spiritual life born of marginality and precarity: regarded with contempt by the bereaved families who engage his services as an *ad hoc* last resort when the Church either charges too much for more conventional means of absolution or refuses it altogether, while rejected by the Church itself as 'unholy competition' (Lynch 2012: 22-3; Foster 2012; Sedgwick 2020). Argyle needs to eat but, like most people, is obliged by the socio-economic system within which he operates to make moral compromises in order to obtain his bread with a reasonable degree of ease. His work engenders loneliness and frustrated desire; it sometimes makes him ill, and there are limits to what he physically can and/or is morally willing to accomplish professionally. Ultimately, however, disappearance is the only, rather unsatisfactory, narrative solution Lynch is able to propose to the practical and moral contradictions of survival in a gig economy: thus in the final poem *Recompense His Paraclete*, Argyle is bequeathed a donkey and '[t]he last was ever seen of them was headed west' (Lynch 2012: 77).

A fictional sin-eater who does eventually gain (re)incorporation into a community is *The Last Sin Eater* of Francine Rivers' eponymous 1998 novel and its 2007 film adaptation. In counterpoint to the humanism and individualism of hypermodernity, *The Last Sin Eater* is a traditional, explicitly Protestant tale of sin and redemption through the grace not of human efforts, but of God, with whom it invites readers to reflect upon their own relationship. Set

amongst second and third-generation Welsh immigrants to Appalachia, the story opens with the death of young Cadi's beloved grandmother, when, as is customary, the community gathers for the sin-eating, which here is performed for everyone. A further point of dramatic licence is the sin-eating's location in a graveyard and at night. Also interpolated is a prohibition against looking at the sin-eater, with the mourners turning their backs just prior to his arrival. Garbed (no costume being mentioned historically) in a hooded, ragged cloak reminiscent of that other quintessential outsider, the leper, the sin-eater consumes the bread and drink, then speaks this incantation which is an elaborated version of Bagford's historical account:

> I give easement now to thee Gorawen Forbes, that you not wander for ever over fields or mountains or long pathways; and for thy earthly sins, dear woman, I pawn my own soul. (*The Last Sin Eater*, Michael Landon Jr. (Director), Twentieth Century Fox, 2007; Bagford 1770: 76).

Cadi cannot resist a glance meanwhile, and her subsequent search for absolution for this transgression drives the film's plot and culminates in the entire community's reconciliation with one another in Christ. As a very unchristian tale of collective violence, guilt and intimidation over generations emerges, the sin-eater's name and biography are revealed: he is Sim Gillivray, chosen twenty years previously by rigged lot as scapegoat for the community's troubled past and haunted present. With the truth finally spoken and the real perpetrators identified and shamed, Sim can reclaim not only his name, but also his true love, and furthermore his rightful spiritual and social position as minister leading the community into the light of God's grace.

To Know or Not to Know

The hypermodern '[i]nternet galaxy and its deluge of digital streams: millions of sites, billions of pages and characters' (Lipovetsky 32) presents the individual with unprecedented agency – but also difficult moral and emotional choices. In particular, anyone with access to

an internet connection must constantly decide whether, and if so, how much and often, to Know about unpleasant and uncomfortable aspects of life; or at least to know that these exist and continually (re)justify to oneself (and others) any decision to remain instead in comfortable ignorance. However, for ignorance to be an option then somebody, somewhere, must Know about the baser aspects of human behaviour in order to be able prevent their incursion into everyday consciousness. The sin-eater, I suggest in this final section, constitutes a useful cipher for those individuals charged by the rest of society with this emotionally burdensome, and morally ambiguous task.[16]

In an episode of *Succession* (HBO 2018), 'the sin-cake[17] eater' is invoked in the context of corporate business executives and their material enrichment in return for the performance of sometimes-dubious responsibilities. This follows in the tradition of *Precious Bane*'s Gideon Sarn, an earlier fictional sin-eater who also undertakes the burden of Knowing in exchange for status and material enrichment. The sin-eating scene in the 1989 film adaptation of *Precious Bane* closely follows that described in the book, with the ritual taking place at night under the church lych-gate, thus literally and spiritually on the ecclesiastical boundaries. This aspect is further emphasised by the presence of Sexton, another quasi-ecclesiastical functionary ensures the orderly departure of the dead from this earth, who expectantly asks 'Be there a Sin Eater?' As his mother's distress mounts, Gideon offers to perform the deed if she will surrender the family farm to him. Having secured her agreement, he speaks the incantation 'I give easement and rest now to thee, dear man, Come not down the lanes nor in our meadows. And for thy peace I pawn my own soul.' This wording is derived from the historical Bagford account, elaborated by Webb and subsequently screenwriter Maggie Wadey, to emphasise Gideon's cynical duplicity: while appearing to be the dutiful son wishing rest to his father's soul, Gideon actually is asserting his own ownership of the property (Webb [1925] 1978: 34-36; McNeil 1971: 143; *Precious Bane*, Christopher Menaul (Director), BBC, 1989). However due to

Gideon's subsequent mismanagement the farm eventually burns down and he himself is ignominiously drowned; thus the cynical individualism and exploitation of others so characteristic of hypermodernity is represented as futile, with patience and loyalty to traditional family values instead rewarded as Gideon's sister Prue finally inherits her rightful legacy.

Another occupation latterly associated with sin-eating is the internet content moderator (S. Roberts 2019: 64-65), and - part of a wider trend identified by scholars for post-millennial cultural production to explore and articulate the uncomfortable, uncanny aspects of the digital realm (Blake & Reyes 2016: 1-6) – sin-eaters are well represented in this arena. In a 2016 episode of the urban-fantasy comedy-drama series *Lucifer*, the titular anti-hero refers explicitly to the content moderators as sin-eaters, labouring in the moral byways of cyberspace to protect others from the darker aspects of human existence. Subsequently, a BBC Radio documentary explored this premise further, interviewing real-life content moderators and police officers employed to assess pornographic and other transgressive imagery (BBC 2018). A further imaginative development of the content moderator as the sin-eater's digital descendent is the story of Alan Hakman, hero of *The Final Cut* (2004). Yet another orphan who becomes a sin-eater, Alan is a 'cutter' who edits the memories of dead clients, recorded by an implanted chip, to present a sanitised version of them to family, friends and posterity. Alan is a lonely, melancholy character, visibly weighed down by his knowledge of the worst of human nature but determined to bear the burden as atonement for the boyhood transgression by which he believes he killed his friend. At one funeral, when challenged about the morality of his occupation, Alan explicitly likens himself to the sin-eaters of old, sacrificing his own soul for the sake of others' comfort. However, the seed of doubt has been planted and, like Alex Bernier and Argyle, he begins actively to exercise his own agency, including refusing to edit a paedophile's memories. The man's memories do, however, resurrect a figure from Alan's own past and, with assistance from some fellow cutters, it transpires that his entire life's work has

been built upon a faulty memory. The tragedy of Alan's eventual murder is that it occurs just as he has begun to discover the joy of friendship, and even romance. Although as seen in the final scene Alan's own, discovered during the course of the story, Zoe chip still has the capacity to bring justice to and for those harmed by his work, the posthumous nature of his social and moral (re)integration – in contrast with, for example, that of Sim Gillivray (above) – leaves viewers with a lingering sense of unease at a narrative not quite completed.

Conclusions

Richard Munslow has been dead for well over a century now, and with him the sin-eater's mysterious rituals in service of the souls of the dead. All that remains of them as historical figures are fleeting, teasing hints – silences and ambiguities destined to remain unanswered and unreconciled. Since the 1980s, however, representations of sin-eaters have suddenly proliferated within a wide variety of media. Even a cursory glance across this range of cultural productions, and their relation to the social, emotional and moral dilemmas presented by hypermodern existence, has suggested that the burgeoning of fictional sin-eaters at this particular point in time is no accident. Future in-depth case studies will yield further insights as to the various means by which this is accomplished, with what success, and precisely what this may reveal about the desirability and/or practicability of hypermodernity itself as a set of lived values. For now, however, the basis has been established that, as 'Western' society hypermodernises - or at least considers doing, or attempts to do so - gaps and contradictions in the historical record concerning sin-eaters constitute remarkably fertile ground for the exploration of related hopes and fears about identity and anonymity, exclusion and belonging, structure and agency.

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[1] Leviticus 16:21: 'And Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions in all their sins, putting then upon the head of the goat, and shall send him away by the hand of a fit man into the wilderness.' See also Hosea 4:8: 'They eat up the sin of my people, and they set their heart on their iniquity.'
[2] Dual Julian/Gregorian dating.
[3] Aubrey was for instance dismissed by Thomas (1895) as 'none too strong a witness' but defended by Hartland as 'a careful and enlightened enquirer into old customs' (1895a: 387).
[4] Challenging Bagford's claim that sin-eating had ever been practiced in Shropshire, Burne (1884: 307-8) criticised him as 'but a second-hand authority, whose account was committed to writing some thirty years after Aubrey's own.' Hartland (1895a: 387) disagreed with Burne's assessment, and the case of Shropshire sin-eater Richard Munslow suggests that, in this respect at least, Hartland was correct. See note 12 below re Burne's compilations of Shropshire folklore as inspiration for the pivotal sin-eating scene in Mary Webb's *Precious Bane*.
[5] Dual Julian/Gregorian dating.
[6] A. Roberts (1876: 221) dismissed Downes' sin-eater account as unhistorical and merely 'a fancy sketch on Aubrey's text.' Although this is impossible to prove, it can certainly be said that in structure and language Downes' account does bear a striking resemblance to Fiona MacLeod's later, and definitely fictional sin-eater tale.
[7] The anonymous author of this article was accused of over-reliance on old, secondary sources rather than actively collecting current material 'at the firesides of the people' (Fitzgerald, 1895). During this and the following year the *Blackwood's* author was also active, if still stubbornly anonymous, in their defence of Moggridge as a frequently vituperative debate over the veracity of the Llandebie sin-eater raged in the pages of *The Academy*.
[8] Consumption of wine at funerals has a long history in the British Isles: Frisby, 2019: 222.
[9] The veracity of Moggridge's claims would subsequently be disputed via acrimonious and ultimately inconclusive bouts of correspondence during 1875-6 (The Author, 1875: 555; Silvan Evans, 1876a: 125-6; The Author, 1876a: 147; Silvan Evans, 1876b: 197-8) and again in 1895-6 (Thomas, 1895; Hartland, 1895a-b; Owen, 1895a-b; Hartland 1896a-d; Owen, 1896b; Thomas, 1896a-d).
[10] All conversions are to 2017 monetary values, the latest year available via the National Archives Historic Currency Convertor Currency converter: 1270–2017 (nationalarchives.gov.uk) accessed 12/07/2021.
[11] Fiona McLeod was a pseudonym of William Sharp (1855-1905), Scottish poet and literary biographer.
[12] The pivotal sin-eating scene in *Precious Bane* having been inspired by Charlotte Burne's compilations of real-life Shropshire folklore (see note 4 above).
[13] Released as *The Sin Eater* in the US; to avoid confusion with the other, similar titled creative works discussed here I use the UK release title *The Order*.
[14] Alan Hakman and Argyle, two other fictional sin-eaters discussed later, also experience such key moments of realisation.
[15] Not only is there no sin-eating scene at all in the original novel, where it is merely stated that 'the honours [were done] with exact propriety' (Stephenson, 1996 [1889]: 121), neither is sin-eating depicted in the previous 1953 film version.
[16] On the morally ambiguous nature of all confessors, who must possess 'an encyclopaedic knowledge of sin [in order to] select and impose the appropriate penance' see Weber, 2010: 27-28.
[17] Sin-eating possibly conflated here with the other historic folk custom of soul-caking on/around All Souls' Night.

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