Abstract: The Gothic Executioner in Golden Age Mysteries

A subset of Golden Age crime writing was focused on a fear of the ghostly figure of the executioner; in narratives including Paul Lancaster's *The Executioner's Axe* (1928), John Dixon Carr's *The Plague Court Murders* (1934) and Eric Harding's *Behold! The Executioner!* (1939), the crime is committed by a perpetrator who poses as the ghost of an executioner from a previous era. While each story of haunting is ultimately fully explained away, these narratives are also embedded in objects and landscapes that have powerful psychological and historic symbolism. In Lancaster's earlier and slighter novel, a perpetrator commits an accidental murder while dressed as a medieval executioner at a masked ball. However, as I will argue, the 1930s novels that follow Lancaster have an even darker atmosphere, with a more credible scene of haunting. In Dixon Carr's *The Plague Court Murders*, a house appears to be haunted by the fictional 17th Century executioner Louis Playge and a murder is committed with the dagger he used to draw and quarter those he executed. This dagger had previously been stolen from a mock condemned cell in The Museum of Old London. Similarly, in *Behold! The Executioner!* an ancestral house and landscape are haunted by the Malloway family, who were cursed after a feudal lord wrongly usurped the role of executioner, with the murder weapon an original headsman's axe passed down from this transgression. These details ensure that both Dixon Carr's and Harding's novels are extremely successful as horror narratives, as well as crime fiction, with a genuinely fearful atmosphere created before the conventional revelation that these serial murders were not in fact wrought by supernatural means. Further, in the case of Dixon Carr and Harding the true perpetrator is finally found to be, revealingly, a police officer, queering this sceptical presentation of the justice of capital punishment still further. Ultimately, I will show that these interwar novels therefore express, in different ways, a distaste for the practice of capital punishment, as well as highlighting the way that sensational, psychological force for these crime narratives is generated by the aura of violence surrounding the death penalty.

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