Mister Punch as Sacrificial Victim in *The Wicker Man*

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Why does Sergeant Howie end up dressed as Punch before he is ritually sacrificed in *The Wicker Man* (Hardy, 1973)? The use of Punch as sacrificial victim in the film seems to bear little resemblance to the figure’s traditional role as the homicidal stick-wielding menace of Punch and Judy fame. The first recorded script of the hand puppet show, *The Tragical Comedy or Comical Tragedy of Punch and Judy*, based on an 1827 performance by Giovanni Piccini, features a Punch who beheads his neighbour, beats and murders his baby and Judy, murders the doctor who tries to help him after a fall from a horse, beats to death a servant, kills a beggar, assaults the constable who comes to arrest him, hangs the hangman who tries to execute him, and finally slays the Devil himself.¹ One of Punch’s traditional final speeches after the Devil’s defeat is reproduced in Neil Gaiman and Dave McKean’s graphic novel, *The Comical Tragedy or Tragical Comedy of Mr. Punch* (1995), a fictional account of a man’s encounters with the violence in his own family history, and with the staged violence of the Punch and Judy show. Here Punch proclaims, ‘Hooray! Hooray! The Devil is dead! Now everybody is free to do whatever they wish!’² The benefits of this situation are unclear, however. One might argue that Punch has singlehandedly demonstrated the dangers of everybody being allowed to do whatever they wish.

Howie’s role in *The Wicker Man* seems directly opposed to Punch’s, as the sergeant’s finger-pointing and moralising ways suggest someone much more invested in maintaining social controls. The film’s depiction of Punch is further complicated by his symbolic position in the May Day festival. In Howie’s researches at the Summerisle library, we learn with him that Punch’s role in the ‘fertility dramas’ makes him ‘the most complex of all the symbolic figures. [He is] a privileged simpleton, and king for a day.’ Later, as Howie is about to be sacrificed, Miss Rose explains some of the further implications of the Punch costume he is wearing:

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You are the fool, Mr. Howie, Punch. One of the great fool victims of history. For you have accepted the role of king for a day, and who but a fool would do that?

The film's use of Punch seems related primarily to its investments in a carnivalesque role-reversal, whereby Howie as fool becomes the focal point of the May Day celebrations, and the key figure in Summerisle's appeasement of its gods.

An examination of the origins of the Punch of puppet theatre suggests the complex roots of this character's behaviour, and provides further insight into the theatrical nature of The Wicker Man's use of the Punch costume. As theatre historians have argued, Punch's origins are traceable to the Commedia figure Pulcinella. Pulcinella shares Punch's hooked nose, and is sometimes depicted with a hunchback. Pulcinella was the basis for popular characters in both the marionette and the hand-puppet theatres. A possible key to understanding Howie's misfortunes on Summerisle may be found in the contrast between these two derivations of Pulcinella. Michael Byrom describes 'Pulcinella's dual personality [...] his character as a glove-puppet [is] cunning, witty, lewd, but essentially homicidal.' However, 'as a marionette [...] his nature was basically [...] that of a half-witted buffoon although including an element of peasant guile.' The human mask of the Commedia 'is submissive, cowardly, greedy and lazy, but good humoured; like the circus clown, he gets all the kicks'. A potential key to Howie's fate in The Wicker Man may be found in one of the more popular Pulcinella Commedia plots, in which Pulcinella is 'the ill-bred country bumpkin who [comes] to town with disastrous results'. As he investigates the disappearance of Rowan Morrison, Howie stumbles through Summerisle, surprised and disgusted by everything he sees, and repeatedly revealing his limited imagination.

Further complicating the use of Punch in The Wicker Man is the idea of the scapegoat derived from one of the film's sources,
James Frazer’s *The Golden Bough* (1890-1922). Although there are many examples of scapegoating discussed in Frazer’s study, of particular interest is a custom practised by the Greeks of Asia Minor in the sixth century BCE:

> When a city suffered from plague, famine, or other public calamity, an ugly or deformed person was chosen to take upon himself all the evils which afflicted the community [...] he was beaten seven times upon his genital organs with squills and branches of the wild fig and other wild trees, while the flutes played a particular tune. Afterwards he was burned on a pyre built of the wood of forest trees; and his ashes were cast into the sea.\(^6\)

The use of a physically deformed individual as scapegoat offers a partial explanation for the use of the Punch costume in *The Wicker Man*, since its twisted facial features and hunchback give Howie the deformed appearance of this type of sacrificial victim. In his keynote address at the July 2003 *The Wicker Man* Conference, held at the University of Glasgow’s Crichton Campus in Dumfries, Robin Hardy made a further connection between Punch’s hunchback and the use of the costume in the film, arguing that Punch’s physical deformity is an integral part of the figure’s position as human sacrifice. In his account, the hunchback is the target of the whips used to scourge the scapegoat.\(^7\) Presumably, when the costume is employed, this hunchback provides a cushion to render the scapegoat’s punishment more symbolic than actual. However, in the case of *The Wicker Man*’s ultimate ending, the sacrifice becomes real enough.

The use of the Punch costume in *The Wicker Man* engages with the origins of the character Punch in a number of ways, but it is in the theatrical impact of the Punch and Judy hand-puppet shows that the film most fascinatedly engages with traditional

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\(^7\) Hardy, ‘Keynote Address’. 
uses of Punch. An examination of the similarities between Howie’s adventures on Summerisle and Punch and Judy exposes some of the ways in which The Wicker Man exploits and subverts notions of role-playing, theatricality, and narrative. In accordance with Punch’s mixed origins, the residents of Summerisle blend ritual and drama in a manner that renders the two indistinguishable from each other. Howie himself is in turns the bumbling Pulcinella, struggling with cultural standards that are completely foreign to him, and the belligerent Punch who allows his belief in his home culture’s values to fuel his desire to heap abuse on Lord Summerisle and his followers.

On a meta-theatrical level, Howie’s experiences on Summerisle reciprocate the Punch and Judy show’s use of audience interaction. As John Harries notes in his discussion of a contemporary Punch and Judy performance, ‘it is seemingly the children who control the fate of the actors […] through the giving and withholding of information, [they appear] to be orchestrating the entire sequence of dramatic action’. Harries notes the artificial nature of this empowerment, however, arguing that:

Finally […] the Punch and Judy world, where children are little gods directing the fate of wooden mortals, is simply play […]. The whole situation in which the children are allowed to play at power is tightly controlled by the performers: they tell the children what to say, when to say it, when to believe and when to doubt.

As we shall see, Howie’s sense of authority and control is not only limited by the Summerisle residents; it is regulated by them in accordance with their plan to ritually sacrifice him. The use of Punch in The Wicker Man suggests a number of issues at work in the film: the idea of identity as something that is ‘put on’; the blurring of the lines between audience and performer, between

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8 Harries, “‘Come See a Traditional Punch and Judy’”, p. 73.
9 Harries, “‘Come See a Traditional Punch and Judy’”, p. 74.
role and player; and the idea that the story being told is in some sense pre-determined.

Performing Punch has traditionally entailed a long course of training and engagement with tradition that results in the show forming part of the performer’s identity. Robert Leach discusses the inheritance of Punch and Judy through a family line in Blackpool. Joe Green, the Punch and Judy man on whom he focuses, grew up observing the performances of his father. The Punch and Judy show has been a part of his life since childhood. The physical requirements of performing Punch, and the traditions by which the techniques for doing so are handed down, require the performer to view Punch and Judy as part of his or her identity. On another level, some studies suggest the physical characteristics of Punch himself are the result of the combination of the hand puppet with the human hand that wears it. Leach suggests that Punch’s aggressive tendencies stem from the hand puppet’s ability to hold and wield the stick that proves so damaging to the other characters in the show, a trait not shared by the marionette. Leslie Katz and Kenneth Gross observe that hand and puppet work together to create the character of Punch:

The range of [Punch’s] actions equals and interprets the range of movements and actions available to a human puppeteer’s hands, wrists, and upper arms [...]. Punch’s delight in grabbing and tossing – both tiny objects and other puppets – might even suggest a sense of the puppet’s willingness to let a human hand act as its animating ‘soul,’ the hand *cum* puppet’s delight in becoming, though only a part of a body, still magically, sufficiently whole.

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10 Leach, ‘Punch and Judy and Oral Tradition’, p. 76. Fascinatingly in this context, Leach notes that when one of Joe Green’s Punch figures ‘becomes too battered or worn down to continue using, he adapts it so it becomes Judy or Joey or another character. When he has finished with it, he burns it, for he cannot bear the idea of someone else using one of his puppets’, p. 76.

11 Leach, *The Punch and Judy Show*, p. 18.

In his use of Punch to create a work of fiction, Neil Gaiman uses the idea of Punch’s tendency to absorb the wearer’s identity to explore the possibility of gaining new insight. In Gaiman’s *Mr. Punch*, the narrator describes a childhood experience of putting on the crocodile puppet:

I slid the puppet onto my left hand; and it came to life. I’m not talking about anything fantastical here. You can try it yourself – find a hand-puppet, slide it on your arm, flex your hand, move your fingers. And somehow, in the cold space between one moment and the next, the puppet becomes alive."\(^3\)

This experience is empowering for the narrator: he fantasises about taking the crocodile to school with him and frightening his teachers, and taking it home to eat his sister.\(^4\) Later, however, he fears the prospect of putting on the Punch puppet, ultimately refusing to do so when offered the opportunity: ‘I almost put it on. It would have whispered its secrets to me, explained my childhood, explained my life.’ He imagines being a part of the Punch drama, ‘walking from town to town with my burden on my back, teaching the children, and those with an eye and a mind to see with, the lessons of death that went back to the dawn times,’\(^5\) but he cannot. The mysteries he has repeatedly confronted throughout his life remain unexplained. It seems that he finds the prospect of truly sharing Punch’s perspective too chilling.

The blending of the characteristics of costume and wearer associated with dressing as Punch occurs in *The Wicker Man* perhaps most obviously as the putting on of the Punch costume is the final step Howie takes before losing his life. On more than one level, this change in costume costs Howie his identity. Prior to this, Howie definitely equates his identity with his uniform, as he repeatedly reminds those with whom he speaks that he is a police officer. ‘I am a police officer’ he shouts at the harbour

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\(^5\) Gaiman and McKean, *The Comical Tragedy*, p. 74, p. 76.
master through a loud speaker. In The Green Man, he interrupts the patrons’ performance of the song ‘The Landlord’s Daughter’ to announce, ‘I think you all ought to know that I am here on official business’. In the schoolhouse, he tells the female students, ‘I am a police officer, as you can see’, making reference to his own uniform as a signifier of his identity. This identity proves ultimately as superficial as the uniform itself, however.

In knocking Alder MacGregor over the head and stealing his Punch costume — a distinctly Punch-like act — Howie makes the gesture that eventually results in his death. This action may be read as a sort of sly glance at the Punch and Judy show’s use of the policeman who tries to arrest Punch and is killed by him. In putting on the Punch costume, Howie re-enacts the violence done by Punch to the policeman in the traditional Punch and Judy shows. Here Howie effectively ‘kills’ one identity and allows Punch to take over. Additionally, the costume makes explicit Howie’s completion of at least one of the conditions of his appropriateness as a sacrifice: that he should come as a fool. In playing Punch, Howie goes beyond mere play, combining his own identity with that of the character of Punch to become the ideal sacrifice.

Howie’s deadly costume change thus becomes a key point of the blurring between his identity and the role he is lured into adopting. This confusion is part of the film’s larger scheme of topsy-turvy theatricality, by which it blurs the line between audience and performer, observer and observed. While Howie comes to the island to investigate the disappearance of Rowan Morrison, essentially to observe, he is frequently subjected to the blank stares of the Summerislanders as he attempts to interrogate them. The eye that decorates the prow of the harbormaster’s boat that rows Howie ashore becomes an ambiguous signifier, inviting the question of whose eye is on whom. The film’s ostensible plot encourages the impression that Howie is observing the strange rites and rituals of Summerisle’s heathen culture, and invites the viewer to observe along with him. However, The Wicker Man’s ending reveals that the gaze has in fact been directed at Howie since before the action of the film began, and that he has been deliberately drawn to the island and into the ritual itself.
The question of who performs and who watches in the film is increasingly complicated as Howie is led by the Summerislander through a drama of their devising – in this sense, he is the sole audience member in the play they are constantly creating around him. Indeed, the islanders actively obscure their true agenda by supporting Howie’s delusion that he is on Summerisle as an investigator. When he demands to know where Rowan is, Lord Summerisle responds, ‘Sergeant Howie, I think that you are supposed to be the detective here’. This prompt evokes Howie’s most exemplary behaviour as detective, as he is inspired to renew the investigation, and he breaks into the photographer’s shop, develops the photograph that reveals the picture of Rowan as queen of the harvest festival, and pieces together a provisional solution to the mystery of her disappearance. A flashback reminds us that Lord Summerisle has already hinted at the possibility of an impending ritual sacrifice. In addition to telling Howie that he honours the rituals of the old gods, he has planted the seeds of suspicion by commenting, ‘perhaps it’s just as well that you won’t be here tomorrow to be offended by the sight of our May Day celebrations’. If Howie were uncertain about the significance of May Day, the calendar in the photographer’s shop has the day circled in red, a further reminder of the day’s importance and potential dangers. Convinced by this evidence that Rowan is still alive, Howie’s prejudices with regard to Pagan society lead him directly to the conclusion that Rowan is going to be sacrificed, which is precisely the conclusion Lord Summerisle has desired him to reach.

The performative nature of the Summerisle residents’ plot is perhaps exemplified in the sequence in which Howie attempts to find Rowan by searching the village. As Howie invades houses and storms into businesses, the villagers continue to play with his expectation that he will discover the truth, refusing to remove their masks, showing him the costumes they plan to wear in the festivities, and in the case of the woman in the bathtub, allowing him to stare frankly. One of the more vicious flirtations with fulfilling Howie’s desire to discover the truth involves the young girl who falls out of the cupboard with a trace of blood at the corner of her mouth, apparently dead – a parody of the corpse of Rowan that Howie might expect to find.
The villagers' performances become increasingly theatrical as they require that Howie move to the place of sacrifice. Howie is apparently so engaged in his role as investigator that he does not question why the hobby-horse seems to deliberately invite him to follow, pausing in doorways and snapping his jaws so that Howie can find him. Having been led to the place where the villagers are gathering prior to the procession, Howie listens from behind a wall as Lord Summerisle announces the starting point and route the villagers will follow. He also gathers the information about MacGregor's use of the Punch costume. Back at the inn, Willow and her father engage in a sort of stage-whispered conversation outside of Howie's room, obviously planning that Howie will hear what they say and preparing the way for his appropriation of the Punch costume. As the sole audience member for the Summerisle residents' performances as Pagans with sinister motives, Howie is compelled to perform the conditions of the ritual sacrifice in which he becomes the key figure.

_The Wicker Man_ thus evokes the idea that life and drama are inseparable: the Summerislanders appear to prepare for a mock ritual in order to enact the ritual that they believe will actually save their crops and secure their livelihoods. This notion is present in traditional Punch performances as well. Although Punch performances do vary from one another, many of them contain, as Harries notes, an emphasis on Punch's tradition of violence. The Punch and Judy performer he interviews maintains that this violence is not only integral to the idea of Punch and Judy, but that the physical capabilities involved in performing these actions are a part of his identity as a Punch and Judy man. Keeping Punch in frenetic action for fifteen minutes as he kills victim after victim is physically challenging:

Yet again in his claim to skill, in his ability to do what others cannot, Professor Wotsit is maintaining a sense that his performance is traditional, for he previously argued that one element of the real Punch and Judy is that Punch is never bested [...]. To let Punch die is
to allow the puppeteer’s lack of endurance to compromise history.\textsuperscript{16}

In \textit{Mr. Punch}, the human characters behave increasingly like the violent figures from the show. In one especially disconcerting episode, the young narrator witnesses his grandfather beating his mistress with a wooden plank. Drama and life almost literally bleed into one another in a manner that is especially disturbing given the nature of Punch’s story.

On Summerisle, the distinction between life and drama breaks down, as does the distinction between the residents’ performances as a form of entertainment and as ritual. Lord Summerisle tells Howie that his father ‘brought me up […] to reverence the music and the drama and the rituals of the old Gods’. For Summerisle society, drama and ritual are virtually indistinguishable, both taking on additional purpose beyond entertainment, and beyond even such cultural significance possessed by something like Punch’s twisted morality play.

In order to position Howie as the focal point of this ritual, Lord Summerisle and his followers participate in the tradition of verbal insurrection that is part of the Punch and Judy show. As Katz and Gross note, Punch combines ‘violence and coercive misnaming […] like speech intentionally mishandled by its speaker, [this technique] undermines the assumption of a natural connection between language and intention’.\textsuperscript{17} In the show, Punch thus convinces the servant to rename the bell as a different instrument each time he strikes him with it, finally killing him with a succession of blows: ‘This is my bell [\textit{hits}], this is my organ [\textit{hits}], this is my fiddle [\textit{hits}], this is my drum [\textit{hits}], and this is my trumpet [\textit{hits}]
—there! a whole concert for you.’\textsuperscript{18} This form of verbal confusion is practised throughout the film by many of the Summerislanders, but Miss Rose in particular.

When Howie confronts Lord Summerisle and Miss Rose with the corpse of the hare he has found in Rowan’s purported grave, he tells them, ‘I found that in Rowan Morrison’s grave […] a sacrilege.’ Miss Rose responds, ‘Only if the ground is

\textsuperscript{16} Harries, “Come See a Traditional Punch and Judy”, p. 70.
\textsuperscript{17} Katz and Gross, ‘The Puppet’s Calling’, p. 9.
\textsuperscript{18} Cited in Katz and Gross, ‘The Puppet’s Calling’, p. 8.
consecrated to the Christian belief.' This distinction is among the many Miss Rose makes as she plays at educating Howie in the ways of Summerisle. To most of his questions, including that of whether or not Rowan is dead, she responds, 'you would say so', or 'after a manner of speaking', appearing to comply with his interrogation while ultimately providing no answer at all. Howie tells her, 'Miss, I hope you don’t think I can be made a fool of indefinitely'. Unfortunately for him, this is exactly her intention. In rendering Howie a fool long before he actually puts on the Punch costume, Miss Rose and the other Summerisle residents fashion an identity for him that fits the costume itself.

The lack of distinction between ritual and drama becomes especially clear in the final scene of The Wicker Man, in which the story Howie (and, arguably, the first-time viewer of the film) believes he has been dealing with gives way to the ritual that has propelled it all along. The revelation of the covert Pagan agenda thus exposes the double nature of the plot of The Wicker Man, as Howie’s investigation is subsumed by the ritual intended to renew Summerisle’s crops. Although Howie has been pursuing his investigation, the Summerisle residents have brought him to the island in order to test his appropriateness as a ritual sacrifice. As Lord Summerisle tells him, he is uniquely suited to his new role. He is:

The most acceptable sacrifice that lies in our power. Animals are fine, but their acceptability is limited. A little child is even better, but not nearly as effective as the right kind of adult [...]. You, Sergeant, are the right kind of adult.

Howie’s king-like authority, established through his representation of the law, his arrival on Summerisle of his own free will, and his virginity all make him precisely the figure Summerisle requires for its sacrifice. The final component, that he is a fool, is one that the residents have created through their plot against him.

The Wicker Man’s double plot has some implications for different models of narrative at work in the film, with radically different ideas of the role of free will and human decision-making
in the determination of the ultimate fate of the characters. This is an issue at work in *Mr. Punch*, particularly in a scene in which a seaside puppet show must continue, despite the lack of a performer and the presence of only one audience member. As the child narrator watches, Judy explains, 'Even if there's only one of them, it's started now, and it can't be stopped, not even if the Devil and all his crocodiles came up from hell to stop it.' Punch's immediate question, 'Where's the baby?,' suggests that he's all too eager for the show to go on.19 In this scene, Gaiman exaggerates an aspect of Punch and Judy performance that is implied in its structure.

Leach maintains that the structure of the Punch and Judy show is not consciously formed by the performer, but is inherited. The Punch and Judy performer he examines, Joe Green:

> Has never sat down and consciously planned the structure of the show, never, as it were, formulated a script in any abstract manner. On the contrary, the ability to combine and structure episodes in this way by 'folk' artists is almost always unconscious, born of a lifetime passed in the milieu of the genre, learned by imitating a closely related older practitioner. This is what Lord has called the 'poetic grammar of oral composition,' and it is assimilated in listening and watching, and then developed in performing.20

In *The Wicker Man*, the model used by the people of Summerisle absorbs the narrative model within which Howie operates - which depends upon the idea that he determines his own fate. Once the true nature of the plot is revealed at the end of the film, it is immediately evident that Howie's capacity to affect his environment is neutralised. He will not, as he had planned, save Rowan Morrison and fulfil his role as detective-hero. In addition to being physically prevented from escaping, it is revealed that

20 Leach, 'Punch and Judy and Oral Tradition', p. 84.
his actions have not been free since his arrival on the island. Indeed, his ability to act autonomously is subsumed under the aegis of the ritual, as the residents inform him that his coming to Summerisle of his own free will is one of the conditions of the sacrifice. In the final sequence, the narrative of the ritual expands to retroactively subsume the entire plot of the film. Lord Summerisle explains this in language that is significantly player-oriented. 'The game's over,' he tells Howie:

The game of the hunted leading the hunter.
You came here to find Rowan Morrison, but it is we who have found you and brought you here. And controlled your every thought and action since you arrived [...] as our painstaking researches have revealed, you, uniquely, were the one we needed.

Like Punch's actions in *The Tragical Comedy*, Howie's behaviour is part of a larger cyclical narrative, determined by traditions beyond the control of the individual. In *The Wicker Man*, Howie's identity serves to fulfil the needs of the cycle rather than to determine the action of the plot.

There is a final similarity between Howie and Punch. Punch's relationship to his audience is often hostile, as the children who typically view the Punch and Judy show do not share his moral codes, and are often called upon during the performance to tattle on Punch as he misbehaves. In *Mr. Punch*, Punch defends himself against the audience's accusations that he has killed the baby, crying, 'O! You wicked storytellers!'\(^{21}\) Although Howie's motivations are generally quite different, Punch's hostility here is reminiscent of Howie's reaction to the schoolchildren when he finds the record of Rowan Morrison in the attendance book. 'Liars! Despicable little liars!' he shouts at them. Howie's experiences in Summerisle as a whole cause him to view its people as 'wicked storytellers'. This conflict is in part attributable to the fact that their narrative codes operate in a different manner than those Howie embraces.

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Howie’s Christian culture has conditioned him to view his identity as of singular importance. In the final scene, he tells Lord Summerisle, ‘as a Christian, I hold for resurrection, and even if you kill me now, it is I who will live again, not your damned apples’. For the Summerisle residents, however, individual identity is transformed through the cycle of life into other forms, and thus becomes less central within the narrative they follow. The temporary – if not ultimate – triumph of this cyclical narrative over Howie’s is suggested by Lord Summerisle’s comment that while Summerisle will have its ritual sacrifice, Howie’s personal narrative might still be accommodated, ‘for believing as you do, we confer upon you a rare gift these days: a martyr’s death’. Like Punch, then, Howie persists in attempting to achieve autonomy and complete freedom of action. And also like Punch, Howie is essentially a puppet, operating within a cyclical narrative that ultimately determines his fate.

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