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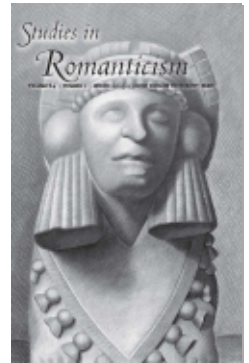
Spring, Streets, and Chimney Sweeps: May Day in Regency
London and Benjamin Robert Haydon's *Punch* (1829)

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Spring, Streets, and Chimney Sweeps: May Day in Regency London and Benjamin Robert Haydon's *Punch* (1829)

ABSTRACT: May Day in Regency London was a festival for the climbing boy, the chimney sweep's apprentice. An icon of poverty in Romantic Britain, the climbing boy stirred sympathy across the nation. However, on May Day, in London, this compassion was troubled by concerns for public safety and social order. Analyzing essays, illustrations, and ephemera, this article reframes the climbing boy, arguing that his raucous festivities often alienated him from the sympathy he typically evoked. It then examines how Benjamin Robert Haydon engaged with this pitiable yet disreputable figure in his major metropolitan genre painting *Punch, or May Day*.

KEYWORDS: May Day; Jack in the Green; Climbing Boy; Chimney Sweep; Benjamin Robert Haydon; *Punch, or May Day*

The Chimney-sweepers of London have . . . singled out the first of May for their festival; at which time they parade the streets in companies, disguised in various manners. Their dresses are usually decorated with gilt paper, and other mock fineries; they have their shovels and brushes in their hands, which they rattle one upon the other; and to this rough music they jump about in imitation of dancing. Some of the larger companies have a fiddler with them, and a Jack in the Green, as well as a Lord and Lady of the May, who follow the minstrel with great stateliness and dance as occasion requires.¹

—Joseph Strutt, *The Sports and Pastimes of the People of England* (1801)

1. Joseph Strutt, *The Sports and Pastimes of the People of England* (London: J. White, 1801), 267.

"MAY-DAY," WROTE WILLIAM HAZLITT IN 1825, "HAS STILL ITS BOASTED exhibition of painted chimney-sweepers and their Jack o' th' Green, whose tawdry finery, bedizened faces, unwonted gestures and short-lived pleasures call forth good-humoured smiles and looks of sympathy in the spectators."² Hazlitt is tolerant. The sweeps' costumes and actions are vulgar, but their revelries are indulged by the sympathetic essayist and the metropolitan audience he represents. His sympathy stems from the plight of the climbing boys, the young apprentices who scrambled up the city's chimneys, clearing their flues of soot. This was dirty, dangerous, claustrophobic work—chimneys could be as narrow as nine inches in diameter, occasionally they were only seven. It was also poorly paid and accompanied by a variety of abuses. Master sweeps, who would pay parents and workhouses to apprentice small boys (and occasionally girls), were known to beat them, starve them, and leave them unwashed for months at a time. Living with accretions of soot on the skin—*sleeping black* as it was known—led to various ailments, the most severe of which was cancer of the scrotum: *chimney sweeps' disease*.³

These circumstances were well-known to Hazlitt and his contemporaries. Reformers had been campaigning for regulation of the sweeping trade since the late eighteenth century, and in the capital the London Society for Superseding the Employment of Climbing Boys (established 1803) had energetically publicized the boys' condition and promoted the adoption of mechanical brushes.⁴ In 1824, the year before Hazlitt's essay, James Montgomery published a significant anthology of pamphlets and poems, *The Chimney-Sweeper's Friend, and Climbing Boy's Album*, which likewise aimed to emphasize, and ultimately end, the apprentices' cruel employment. Among the poems was a reprint of William Blake's "The Chimney Sweeper" (1789). Narrated by a climbing boy sold into apprenticeship by his loveless father, the poem presents us with the human cost of the sweeping trade: "thousands of sweepers Dick, Joe, Ned and Jack . . . all of them lock'd up in coffins of black."⁵ Like the other poets in the anthology, Blake sought to "humanize the climbing boys and aim at the social conscience of society," as Judith Bailey Slagle observes.⁶ The widespread humanitarian concern for the climbing boys, of which there were around five hundred in London in

2. [Hazlitt], "Merry England," *New Monthly Magazine* (January, 1825): 558–59.

3. Tim Fulford, "A Romantic Technologist and Britain's Little Black Boys," *The Wordsworth Circle* 33, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 37.

4. K. H. Strange, *The Climbing Boys: A Study of Sweeps' Apprentices, 1773–1875* (London: Allison and Busby, 1982), 10–34.

5. Blake, "The Chimney Sweeper," in *The Chimney-Sweeper's Friend, and Climbing-Boy's Album*, ed. James Montgomery (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, Brown, and Green, 1824), 343.

6. Slagle, "Literary Activism: James Montgomery, Joanna Baillie, and the Plight of Britain's Chimney Sweeps," *Studies in Romanticism* 51, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 72.

1817, explains why their “tawdry” performance was tolerated by Hazlitt, and why Londoners gave them alms on May Day.⁷

Scholarship on May Day in the early nineteenth century is sparse. The most comprehensive account can be found in Essaka Joshua’s literary study *The Romantics and the May Day Tradition* (2007), the fourth chapter of which explores London’s festivities through the figure of the chimney sweep and the writings of Blake, Leigh Hunt, and Charles Lamb. Joshua argues that although Romantic writers sometimes scorned the sweeps’ May Day, representations of the festival generally acknowledged the sweeps’ piteous condition and were motivated by concerns for their welfare: “Although the sweeps were often treated with contempt, their role in May Day literature is principally to receive the donations or succour of the spectator-figure, whose sensibility is awakened by their performances.”⁸ This reading acknowledges the immense symbolic power that the climbing boy held within Romantic culture. Presented as a victim of capitalism and the inequalities it fosters, the climbing boy was used to highlight the need for social reform at home, just as the plantation slave, a figure with whom he was often compared, was used to promote the need for reform abroad.⁹

However, as I argue in this article, although compassion for the climbing boys was a prominent theme in the print and visual culture of the Regency period, it was often troubled, even eclipsed, by less palatable concerns for social order and public safety in the context of May Day. These concerns are evident in some of the essays examined by Joshua, but are brought into sharper focus when these literary texts are situated alongside newspaper and court reports, paintings and prints. One of this article’s key contributions is to situate the literature of May Day within its broader cultural landscape by examining it alongside visual artworks and ephemeral productions for the first time. This approach reveals that the climbing boys’ raggedness, and expectation of coin, prompted skepticism and disgust in a city where many well-heeled Londoners were convinced that most beggars were duplicitous scroungers: the customary alms begged on May Day could place climbing boys in a new, semi-criminal light that alienated them from the sympathy they typically aroused.

In the rest of this article, I first analyze essays by Hunt and Lamb, situating them within the debates about May Day that emerged in London’s newspaper and periodical press. These were concerned (with different degrees of emphasis) with the abuse of climbing boys, the public disorder they initiated on May Day, and the social enervation they represented. I then turn to Benjamin Robert Haydon’s metropolitan genre painting *Punch, or May Day* (1829) (fig. 2).

7. For the number of climbing boys, see Strange, *The Climbing Boys*, 18–19.

8. Joshua, *The Romantics and the May Day Tradition* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2007), 95.

9. Fulford, “A Romantic Technologist,” 37; Joshua, *The Romantics and the May Day Tradition*, 96; Slagle, “Literary Activism,” 71–72.

Haydon was a close friend of Hunt, and was friends with Hazlitt and Lamb too—they appear in the crowd of his monumental history painting *Christ's Triumphant Entry into Jerusalem* (1820). Reading *Punch* in dialogue with the May Day texts and images of Haydon's friends and contemporaries provides fresh insights into how he engaged with the social and moral issues evoked by the climbing boys' festivities. *Punch* emerges from this discussion as a unique critique of May Day in Regency London, one that resonates with some of the key concerns of the essayists, but also provides a characteristically idiosyncratic portrayal of the festivities.

Invectives and Effusions: Hunt, Lamb & Co.

Climbing boys were pitied, but on May Day they could also inspire revulsion: their revelries held an ambivalent status in Regency culture. In his essay "Old May-Day" (1818), a potted history of the festival from antiquity through to the present, Leigh Hunt bemoaned the loss of London's milk maids, who used to dance through the capital's streets, and the disappearance of "manly games among the gentry" throughout Britain. As he makes clear toward the end of his narrative, the state of May Day in the metropolis is emblematic of the country at large: "all the idea that a Londoner now has of May-day, is the dreary gambols and tinsel-fluttering squalidness of the poor chimney-sweepers! What a personification of the times;—paper-gilded dirt, slavery, and melancholy, bustling for another penny!"¹⁰ Hunt is undoubtedly sympathetic toward "the poor chimney-sweepers," as were many readers of the *Examiner*, the radical newspaper in which the essay first appeared. Their "squalidness" and tired dancing speaks to their degraded condition, or their "slavery," a metaphor that draws on the popular analogy between the climbing boys' apprenticeship and the enslavement of African peoples. This comparison seemed fitting to reformers and their allies because of the boys' blackened skin and the master sweeps' practice of paying impoverished parents to indenture them.¹¹ The sweeps' degradation was also enhanced by the danger inherent in their seven-year apprenticeship which, unlike other trades, taught few skills that could be used to make a living after they had outgrown the chimney. However, although Hunt pities the sweeps, his attitude toward their festivities lacks the patrician indulgence of Hazlitt. Sympathy coexists with regret that this is all that remains of London's May Day and aversion as he describes them begging—"bustling for another penny!"—his contempt sharpened by the exclamation point.

A few years later, now writing in the *New Monthly Magazine*, the balance between Hunt's pity and repugnance had shifted. In "New May-Day and Old-May Day" (1825), the sweeps become the subject of a fierce invective: "*Will*

10. [Hunt], "Old May-Day," *Examiner* (May 10, 1818): 291.

11. Joshua, *The Romantics and the May Day Tradition*, 96; Strange, *The Climbing Boys*, 53.

any body have the goodness to abolish the May-day chimney sweepers!" it begins in frustrated italics. May Day in early modern London, Hunt argues, was "once the gayest of its holidays," a public affair in which everyone paid "homage to Nature."¹² In the nineteenth century, the sweeps commemorate it alone, and their festivities represent a mockery and antithesis of what May Day should be:

They come like a contradiction to the season, as if, because nothing clean, wholesome, and vernal could be got up, the day should be spited with the squalidest and sickliest of our in-door associations. They do not say, We come to make you happy; but to show to the unhappiest man on this very uncomfortable day, that there are youths and little boys who beat his unhappy lot. They understand their perverse business well, and dress up some of their party like girls, because of all masqueraders their dirty dinginess is least suitable to the sex. They contradict even the spirit of masquerade itself; and, like the miser in the novel, wear real chimney-sweeping clothes, with a little tinsel to make the reality more palpable.¹³

Hunt is disgusted. The sweeps' pitiable condition, lamented in his earlier essay, now becomes a source of guilt and resentment, spoiling a day that should be reserved for merrymaking. Hunt's revulsion is centered on the boys' bodies, which are rendered dirtier and more impoverished by their ragged costumes and the practice of cross-dressing, a regular feature of their May Day festivities.¹⁴ Bodies come into focus elsewhere in Hunt's article. Earlier in the diatribe he deploys metaphors of physical disability to characterize the boys' festivities: "Their dancing is that of lame legs; their music a clattering of stumps."¹⁵ Here the "stumps" are peg legs, then the most common form of artificial limb and ubiquitous amongst poor amputees, many of whom would have been excluded from the labor market and reduced to beggary.¹⁶ Writing in an ableist culture which, as Ryan Sweet notes, had "a social preference for physical wholeness," Hunt seeks to emphasize the grotesqueness of the sweeps' parade and tie it to overt forms of begging in which disability is the basis of charity.¹⁷ Hunt's fixation on flesh is also evident at the end of the invective. While speculating that

12. [Hunt], "New May-day and Old May-day," *New Monthly Magazine* 13, no. 6 (1825): 457–58, 461.

13. [Hunt], "New May-day and Old May-day," 458.

14. William Hone observes that the Lady of May "is sometimes a strapping girl, though usually a boy in female attire, indescribably flaunty and gaudy." Hone, *The Every-Day Book and Table Book*, 3 vols. (London: Thomas Tegg and Son, 1838), 1:584–85.

15. [Hunt], "New May-day and Old May-day," 458.

16. Sweet, *Prosthetic Body Parts in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture* (Cham, CH: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 10–11, 104.

17. Sweet, *Prosthetic Body Parts*, 4.

the money the boys receive is probably forfeited to the master sweeps, he declares that “[n]othing is certainly their own but the dirt of which they cannot get rid; and a disease, or the liability to a disease, peculiar to the trade, and disgraceful to human nature.”¹⁸

The complaints that Hunt made were also employed by other commentators. In “May-day Customs” (1818) the *Literary Journal* grumbled about “the ludicrous caperings of the chimney-sweepers, some of whom are fantastically dressed in girls’ clothes” and condemned their performance as an excuse for “begging money of every person they meet.”¹⁹ Two years later in “May Morning” (1821) the *New Monthly Magazine* remarked that the climbing boys with their “ghastly smiles and a lugubrious hilarity” were incongruous with the season.²⁰ A similar analysis also appeared in Peter George Patmore’s book *Mirror of the Months* (1826), in which he described the “sad hilarity of the chimney-sweepers” in the same oxymoronic terms.²¹ And in “May-Day” (1824) the *Literary Chronicle* identified the “antics” of the sweeps as “a poor delusion” out of keeping with the May Day spirit because they “assist them in gaining a livelihood.”²² None of these journalists argued for the abolition of the sweeps’ festivities in the same vociferous terms as Hunt, but it is clear that they were dissatisfied with its aesthetics, finding them unsuitable, even embarrassing. This response is consistent with a more general pattern of representation in antiquarian texts where the urban customs of the poor were frequently dismissed as outmoded and obsolete. As Philip Connell and Nigel Leask remark, “civic antiquarians frequently pandered to the progressivist assumptions of their respectable readers within the ‘middle orders,’ and the corresponding hostility of such readers to the traditional plebian component of customary ritual and ceremony.”²³

Apart from its aesthetics, it is noticeable that these commentators were concerned with the boys begging, an activity licensed by decades of precedent, but now unwelcome. These feelings were no doubt charged by the prevalence of begging during the economic depression that followed the Napoleonic Wars.²⁴ An increase in beggars, many of whom were veterans or the widows of soldiers and sailors, was accompanied by a widespread belief that London was full of imposters defrauding the public: as the 1816 Select Committee on the State of Mendicity in the Metropolis concluded, “gross and monstrous frauds [are]

18. [Hunt], “New May-day and Old May-day,” 458.

19. “May-day Customs,” *Literary Journal* (May 1818): 91.

20. H., “May Morning,” *New Monthly Magazine* 3 (1821): 584.

21. Patmore, *Mirror of the Months* (London: George B. Whittaker, 1826), 104.

22. S. L., “May-Day,” *Literary Chronicle*, May 1, 1824, 281.

23. Connell and Leask, “What is the People?,” in *Romanticism and Popular Culture in Britain and Ireland*, ed. Connell and Leask (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 32.

24. Alistair Robinson, *Vagrancy in the Victorian Age: Representing the Wandering Poor in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 16.

practiced by mendicants in the capital.”²⁵ A year later, John Thomas Smith included a masked May Day reveler with a money box in his topical catalogue *Vagabondiana; or, Anecdotes of Mendicant Wanderers Through the Streets of London* (1817). He wrote: “the streets are infested by such fellows as the one exhibited in the adjoining plate, who . . . exhibit all sorts of grimace and ribaldry to extort money from their numerous admirers” (see fig. 1).²⁶



Figure 1. John Thomas Smith, *May Day*, 1817, illustration. In *Vagabondiana; or, Anecdotes of Mendicant Wanderers Through the Streets of London*, n. p. Reproduced with permission from UCL Library, Special Collections.

25. *Report from the Select Committee on the State of Mendicity in the Metropolis* (London: House of Commons, 1816), 3.

26. Smith, *Vagabondiana; or, Anecdotes of Mendicant Wanderers Through the Streets of London* (London, 1817), 28–29.

Anxieties about fraud can be detected in Hunt's speculation that the boys surrendered their May Day takings to their masters. William Hone, who provides an enthusiastic account of the sweeps' festivities in *The Every-Day Book* (1826–27), had similar suspicions, observing that some “masters share a certain portion of their apprentices' profits from the holiday” while others leave the boys with no more than “scanty gleanings.”²⁷ This practice also concerned some master sweeps. In 1826 the United Society of Master Chimney Sweepers published a notice cautioning the public not to give money to apprentices because their collections “are too frequently obtained by persons of the worst descriptions, or for the sinister purpose of their employers.”²⁸ This mistrust complicates Joshua's argument that contemporary complaints were “fuelled by the dissatisfaction with the working conditions of the sweeps and the festival's status as a reminder of their plight.”²⁹ The abuse and raggedness of the climbing boys certainly evoked sympathy, but objections to their celebrations were equally founded on suspicions of deception.

These suspicions could have serious consequences. In May 1825 the *Morning Chronicle* reported:

A motley groupe [*sic*] of May-day sweeps, consisting of Jack in the Green, May-day Moll, a drummer, a mouth-organ player, and a fiddler, with about nine persons of very suspicious appearance, were brought to this office by a party of the Bow-street Patrol. The officers stated, that amongst all the prisoners, there was only one sweep, the rest were well known characters, who were in league with a desperate gang of pick-pockets.³⁰

The May Day band consists of sweeps, musicians, a Lady of May (“May-day Moll”), and a Jack-in-the-Green, a dancer wearing a body-length cone of wickerwork, interlaced with evergreens, and crowned with ribbons or flowers. Together with clowns and a Lord of May, these performers were common in the sweeps' festivities. The group's arrest seems justified to both the reporter and Mr Conant the magistrate because it contains some “well known [criminal] characters” and (allegedly) “only one sweep,” which undermines its perceived authenticity and right to perform on May Day. Accused of trying “to draw crowds together, that they might rob them,” Conant threatens to send them all to prison as “rogues and vagabonds” under the 1824 Vagrancy Act, a sweeping piece of legislation that turned the suspicions of magistrates into imprisonable offences.³¹ These included being a “suspected person or

27. Hone, *The Every-Day Book and Table Book*, 1:585.

28. For a facsimile of the notice, see Hone, *Every-Day Book*, 2:618–19.

29. Joshua, *The Romantics and the May Day Tradition*, 112.

30. “Sweeps,” *Morning Chronicle* (May 4, 1825): 3.

31. “Sweeps,” *Morning Chronicle*, 3; for vagrancy laws see Robinson, *Vagrancy in the Victorian Age*, 12–16.

reputed thief” and “going about as a gatherer or collector of alms . . . under any false or fraudulent pretence,” both of which could apply to this case.³² In the end, four of the party were prosecuted and sent to the house of correction where they would have served up to three months’ hard labor.

Although the sweeps’ revelries attracted critics, commentators welcomed alternative fetes such as feast days. In “The Praise of Chimney-Sweepers: A May-Day Effusion” (1822), Charles Lamb enthusiastically recalls the “annual feast of the chimney-sweepers” organized by his friend James White, a humorist and advertising agent. Held at Smithfield during Bartholomew Fair, the feast comprised sausages and beer, and was solely for the benefit of the climbing boys. Lamb mourns the loss of White’s suppers, which ceased after his death, but encourages his readers to feast the boys in their own small way. Noting the climbing boys’ fondness for saloop (a sweet, hot drink made of powdered sassafras wood), Lamb urges them to treat the “unpennied sweep” and “regale him with a sumptuous basin [of it] (it will cost thee but three half-pennies) and a slice of delicate bread and butter (an added half penny).” It is telling that although the essay was originally published in May 1822, and bears the subtitle “A May-Day Effusion,” Lamb omits any mention of the sweeps’ street festivities, which would have been the most immediate context for the metropolitan readers of the *London Magazine*, the publication in which it first appeared. His opening advice that if one meets a climbing boy “it is good to give him a penny” and “better to give him two-pence” might be read as encouragement to give alms on May Day, but if this is Lamb’s intent, he is oblique.³³ His omission of the revelries, and his representation of the boys as hungry urchins, longing for saloop and bread and butter, is a strategy designed to induce empathy in his readers, all of whom (we can assume) had felt the familiar pangs of childhood hunger.³⁴ Where Hunt made the child’s body a point of difference, Lamb made it common ground.

Lamb was not alone in his enthusiasm for feasting sweeps. In the wake of his invective in “New May-Day and Old-May Day,” Hunt concedes that “the chimney-sweepers, as long as they last, ought, above all, not to miss a holiday of some sort. Their dinner should be revived, though the dancing be quashed.” The dinner that Hunt refers to is both the feast at Smithfield and an earlier feast organized by Elizabeth Montagu, the author and literary hostess: her May Day banquet of beef and plum pudding was held annually at her home in Portman Square. By the time Hunt was writing Montagu had been dead for twenty-five years and the dinner disbanded. He therefore

32. Vagrancy Act, 1824, 5 Geo. 4, c. 83.

33. [Lamb], “The Praise of Chimney-Sweepers: A May-Day Effusion,” *London Magazine* (May, 1822): 405–8.

34. Joshua observes that William Blake also chose to eschew May Day celebrations in his depiction of climbing boys, arguing that this emphasised their poverty and oppression. Joshua, *The Romantics and the May Day Tradition*, 111.

suggests that the Society for Superseding the Employment of Climbing Boys “do something [similar] for May-day,” although it was the United Society of Master Chimney Sweepers who acted.³⁵ On May 1, 1826, the year after Hunt’s essay was published, they put on a feast for two hundred apprentices at Eyre Tavern in St John’s Wood. Perhaps taking their cue from Montagu, the menu was roast beef and plum pudding.³⁶ Similar events followed. Ten years later, Charles Dickens wrote that “the master sweeps . . . [have] interposed their authority, in opposition to the dancing, and substituted a dinner—an anniversary dinner at White Conduit House.”³⁷

The attempt to replace the local and fragmented bands performing in streets across the city with a feast held in a single location reflects a desire to control the climbing boys and reduce the licence that they had on May Day. With its almost feudal tone, the dinner can be read as an effort to assert social boundaries through philanthropic structures: the rich feed the poor and in doing so cement their relative positions in the community. For the master sweeps, the annual dinner was also a way of asserting the decency of their trade, which was undermined by disreputable masters, and targeted by reformers and their allies in the press. It is significant that when *The Times* reported on the first annual dinner, the journalist noted the “clean and wholesome appearance of the lads” who marched “in great regularity through the principal streets and squares at the west end of the town, accompanied by an excellent band of music.”³⁸ This was a conspicuous performance of respectability, one that deliberately contrasted with soot-stained revelers elsewhere in the city dancing to the improvised cacophony of drums, trumpets, and brushes rattling on pans.

The public disorder created by the traditional festivities provided the United Society with additional motivations for cleansing the holiday. As we have already seen in the case brought before Magistrate Conant, May Day was perceived as an opportunity for theft. In May 1823 John M’Cowley, Frederick Wyatt, and Charles Rooney were brought before the court at the Old Bailey accused of stealing a four-shilling handkerchief from Anne, aged three, while she was watching a performance in the New Road (now Euston Road). “‘Jack in the Green’ was close by, and there was a mob” gathered round him when Rooney snatched the handkerchief from her neck and tried to make his escape. Unfortunately for Rooney and his accomplices, a constable had been watching them for “nearly an hour.”³⁹ In 1828 the court heard

35. [Hunt], “New May-day and Old May-day,” 458–59.

36. “New Society,” *The Times* (May 3, 1826): 3.

37. Dickens, “The First of May,” in *Dickens’ Journalism: Sketches by Boz and Other Early Papers*, ed. Michael Slater (London: J. M. Dent, 1994), 172.

38. “New Society,” *The Times*, 3.

39. *Old Bailey Proceedings Online*, May 1823, trial of John M’Cowley, Frederick Wyatt and Charles Rooney (t18230514-106), www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 8.0, 01, accessed October 1, 2023.

a similar story from constable James Taylor: “there was a crowd looking at Jack in the Green, and I saw [William] Aston untying a handkerchief from a child’s neck” he reported.⁴⁰ But theft was not the prerogative of spectators. Tim Hitchcock, writing about the sweeps’ May Day in eighteenth-century London, notes that “the element of disguise and cross-dressing occasionally created the opportunity to extort money rather than simply beg for it.”⁴¹ There is no reason to suspect that this practice did not continue into the nineteenth century. A plea for alms might quickly turn into a demand for tribute, especially as succor was expected after decades of precedent.

Theft was not the only form of disorder occasioned by sweeps on May Day. Writing to his daughter Katherine in 1820, the poet laureate Robert Southey observed that “Jack in the Bush is a comical sight, but I am sorry to say that it does harm by frightening horses.” A Jack in Tooting, he reported, had scared the horses of a stage coach and caused a man to be “thrown in consequence under the wheels.”⁴² Identical incidents can be read in the newspapers. In 1828 the *London Evening Standard* reported an accident in Blackfriars Road:

A group of May-day sweeps, decorated with ribbons, accompanied by what is called “Jack in the Green,” and drums, were performing their grotesque capers in the road, when suddenly the horses of a gentleman’s carriage near them started and plunged into the crowd, unfortunately knocking down a little sweep . . . the unfortunate boy was so dreadfully injured by the wheels passing over him, that he died instantly.⁴³

And later, in 1834, *The Times* reported the death of Francis Davis, aged 60, who was struck by a horse drawing a cart in Newington Causeway, Southwark. In this instance, two bands of “rival chimney-sweepers, and a jack-in-the-green . . . danced in rivalry” and frightened the horse when “the drums were beaten very loudly, and the trumpets and other musical instruments were sounded to give greater noise.” At the inquest, Mr. Rose, foreman of the jury, urged the Police Commissioners to “put an end to such nuisances.”⁴⁴ In these accounts, any humanitarian concern for the chimney sweeps was obliterated by the fatalities they caused.

Newspaper reports and criminal proceedings highlight the popularity of May Day festivities. Although they are focused on petty theft and bolting

40. *Old Bailey Proceedings Online*, May 1828, trial of Thomas Crossley and William Aston (t18280529–202), www.oldbaileyonline.org, version 8.0, accessed October 1, 2023.

41. Hitchcock, *Down and Out in Eighteenth-Century London* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2004), 192.

42. Quoted in Roy Judge, *The Jack-in-the-Green: A May Day Custom* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1979), 226.

43. “Dreadful Accident,” *London Evening Standard* (May 2, 1828): 3.

44. *The Times* (May 14, 1834): 5.

horses, the context for these events is a crowded street, a mob following Jack-in-the-Green, and a noisy holiday atmosphere. The drumming, trumpeting, and dancing emerge as chaotic but enthusiastic acts that are irreconcilable with the “dreary gambols” and “gloomy merriment” described by Hunt and Patmore. They also counter Jerry White’s recent claim that “the chimney sweeps’ Jack-in-the-Green and parades on May Day [were] pale shabby things in central London by 1820.”⁴⁵ Some festivities, of course, might have been lifeless affairs, or become increasingly limp as the day wore on. Dickens suggests this in his sketch “The First of May” (1836) when the narrator, encountering a May Day band in the evening, reports that he “never saw a ‘green’ so drunk, a lord so quarrelsome . . . a pair of clowns so melancholy, a lady so muddy, or a party so miserable.” Nonetheless, such dejected scenes were only one manifestation of the celebrations that took place across the city. As Dickens’s narrator concedes elsewhere, “We are ready to acknowledge that in outward show, these processions have greatly improved.”⁴⁶

“Good looking but vulgar”: Haydon’s May Day

In March 1830 Benjamin Robert Haydon opened a new exhibition at the Western Exchange, one of several bazaars that were established in London in the immediate aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars. Precursors of the department store, these bazaars housed stalls and shops that catered to the middle classes, but occasionally also drew custom from aristocrats and royalty. The Western Exchange was a spectacular example. Although situated in an unpretentious three-story building in Old Bond Street, the Exchange’s main retail space was a capacious, skylit room flanked on all sides by an arcaded gallery and flooded by natural light. As well as supplying counterspace to London’s tradespeople, bazaars also hosted attractions such as aquariums, menageries, panoramas, waxworks, and exhibitions of paintings. Madame Tussauds started in a bazaar on Gray’s Inn Road.⁴⁷ Entrance to these exhibits typically cost one shilling, which was the price customers paid to see Haydon’s paintings—the catalogue, written by Haydon and containing descriptions of his latest pieces, cost an additional six pence.

The exhibition contained some of Haydon’s most well-known and popular works, *The Judgement of Solomon* (1814), *Christ’s Triumphant Entry into Jerusalem*, and *Alexander Taming Bucephalus* (1827). As these subjects suggest, Haydon’s speciality was historical painting, a style characterized by scenes drawn from

45. White, *London in the Nineteenth Century: A Human Awful Wonder of God* (London: Vintage, 2008), 258–59.

46. Dickens, “The First of May,” 173, 175.

47. Kathryn A. Morrison, “Bazaars and Bazaar Buildings in Regency and Victorian London,” *The Georgian Group Journal* 25 (2006): 281–84, 287–89.

scripture, literature, or history depicted on a massive scale (*Christ's Triumphant Entry* is twelve feet six inches by fifteen feet one inch). This predilection was evident in other paintings in the exhibition: *Lady Macbeth on the Staircase* (1829), *Xenophon and the Ten Thousand* (1831), and *The Death of Eudes* (1829), which depicts an Athenian soldier collapsing from exhaustion after delivering the news of the Greek victory at Marathon.⁴⁸ *The Death of Eudes*, which was being raffled to clear some of Haydon's substantial debts, headlined the exhibition, but the next most prominent piece was his latest metropolitan genre painting, *Punch and Judy, or Life in London*. This painting, which now hangs in Tate Britain under the title *Punch, or May Day*, was Haydon's third foray into genre painting, a form which depicts scenes from everyday life, often in a comic style, and typically on a much smaller scale than historical paintings: *Punch*—over six feet wide and nearly five feet high—is a very large example. *Punch's* predecessors were *The Mock Election* (1827) and *Chairing the Member* (1828), both of which were set in the King's Bench, a prison for debtors where Haydon was repeatedly incarcerated in the 1820s. *The Mock Election* was particularly well received by critics and won Haydon his only taste of royal patronage. King George IV bought the painting for 500 guineas.⁴⁹



Figure 2. Benjamin Robert Haydon, *Punch, or May Day*, 1829, oil on canvas, 150.5 x 185.1 cm, Tate Britain, London. Reproduced with permission from Tate Images.

48. *Xenophon and the Ten Thousand* was exhibited in an unfinished state. It was completed in 1831.

49. Gregory Dart, *Metropolitan Art and Literature, 1810–1840: Cockney Adventures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 201, 204.

Reviewers responded well to *Punch*. The *Spectator* described it as “a gay and lively picture, full of incident, bustle, and fun.”⁵⁰ *The Times* praised both the theme, “that wonderful wooden actor *Punch*,” and the execution: “The harmony and variety of colour in this picture is very remarkable . . . The groups are managed with a most picturesque effect.”⁵¹ And the *Morning Chronicle*, unstinting in its enthusiasm, declared that “*The Punch* . . . displays, with great truth and excellent tact, all the drollery of the scene in a style of painting wholly unknown to such subjects. It is a rich illustration of human life, in its varieties of mirth and melancholy.”⁵² This enthusiasm has persisted in the twenty-first century. Art historian Luke Herrmann has recently noted that Haydon’s “lively and imaginative narrative compositions”—*The Mock Election*, *Chairing the Member*, and *Punch*—are now his most popular paintings, “far more acceptable than his huge and grandiose historical canvases” which are of “very limited merit.”⁵³

The painting depicts a crowd in the New Road watching *Punch and Judy*, a popular street entertainment in Regency London.⁵⁴ As Hazlitt wrote in his essay “Merry England” (1825):

there is no place . . . where [*Punch*] collects greater crowds at the corners of streets, where he opens the eyes or distends the cheeks wider, or where the bangs and blows, the uncouth gestures, ridiculous anger and screaming voice of the chief performer excite more boundless merriment or louder bursts of laughter among all ranks and sorts of people.⁵⁵

Haydon depicts the enthralled audience that Hazlitt describes, especially through the farmer, who is so enraptured that he does not notice the sneaking hand of the thief working toward his pocket. A soldier, a sharper, a sailor with a young woman, two boys, a crossing sweeper, and a nurse with an entertained infant make up *Punch*’s other spectators while a police officer, lurking behind the rigid and resplendent life-guardsmen, watches the young pickpocket. Drawing toward St Marylebone Church, which can be seen in the background, is a hearse bearing the body of “a sweet girl”; and drawing away from it is a newly married couple, driven by a

50. “Mr. Haydon’s Pictures,” *The Times* (March 5, 1830): 3.

51. “Mr. Haydon’s Pictures,” *Spectator* (March 6, 1830): 153.

52. “Haydon’s *Eucles* and *Punch*. Western Exchange,” *Morning Chronicle* (March 1, 1830): 3.

53. Herrmann, *Nineteenth Century British Painting* (London: Giles de la Mare, 2000), 207–8.

54. Rosalind Crone, “Mr and Mrs *Punch* in Nineteenth-Century England,” *The Historical Journal* 49, no. 4 (2006): 1055–67.

55. [Hazlitt], “Merry England,” 558.

coachman who is also distracted by Punch.⁵⁶ Dancing close to his horses is a May Day band formed of a chimney sweeper with his pan and brush, a Lady of May with her traditional brass ladle, and a Jack-in-the-Green. They are an isolated group ignored by the crowd. The Lady's ladle, which was used to gather coins, is conspicuously empty, and the only figure facing them, the fruit seller on the floor, is asleep.

The reviewers all dwelt on their favourite figures. The *Gentleman's Magazine* noted that "Punch and Judy are admirably painted."⁵⁷ For the *Spectator* the farmer was "a complete piece of nature," the Black footman was "capital," and the fruit seller was "a handsome young girl, with a pair of beautiful feet."⁵⁸ The *Examiner* also admired the "charmingly executed" fruit seller, as did the slightly seedy *Morning Chronicle* which described her as "the most delicious bit" of the painting.⁵⁹ For the *Atlas* "one of the best figures" was the "police-officer watching the motions of the little pickpocket."⁶⁰ He would have been a topical figure in 1830, the year after the Metropolitan Police Act had been passed into law and begun the rapid replacement of London's fragmented parish police offices with a centralized force overseen by the Secretary of State. Although the *Atlas* praised Haydon's execution, the policeman's sneaking figure may have been intended as a critique. The *Athenaeum* identified him as "a thorough thief-taker . . . viz. a consummate ruffian," an interpretation that has been adopted by art historians since.⁶¹ Sadiya Qureshi notes his "cunning expression" while David H. Solkin remarks on the telling contrast between the police officer, whose stooped posture echoes that of the pickpocket, and the upright soldier and sailor, who are identified in Haydon's catalogue as heroes of Waterloo and Trafalgar.⁶² Solkin concludes that the constable is a critique of the new metropolitan police, but this is unlikely.⁶³ Although the first metropolitan police took to the streets at the end of September 1829, six weeks before Haydon completed *Punch*, the first officers were conspicuous in their blue, military-style uniforms that included stiff stocks

56. [Haydon], "Description of Eucles, and Punch, with Other Pictures, Drawings, and Sketches, Painted by B. R. Haydon, Now Exhibiting at the Western Exchange, Old Bond Street. Up Stairs" (London: Printed for the Proprietor, 1830), 8.

57. "Mr Haydon's Pictures," *Gentleman's Magazine* (March 1830): 251.

58. "Mr. Haydon's Pictures," *Spectator*, 152.

59. "Mr Haydon's Exhibition," *Examiner* (March 7, 1830): 148; "Haydon's *Eucles* and *Punch*. Western Exchange," *Morning Chronicle*, 3.

60. "Mr. Haydon's Pictures," *Atlas* (March 7, 1830): 156.

61. "Mr. Haydon's Pictures," *Athenaeum* (March 6, 1830): 139.

62. Qureshi, *Peoples on Parade: Exhibitions, Empire, and Anthropology in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 39; [Haydon], "Description of Eucles," 7.

63. Solkin, *Painting Out of the Ordinary: Modernity and the Art of Everyday Life in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2008), 229.

to stop garrotting and a top hat reinforced with iron.⁶⁴ Haydon's officer is missing this equipment: it seems more likely that he is a critique of the old order, the kind of constable that we have already encountered watching the crowds that followed Jack-in-the-Green.

The May Day band received a mixed reception. *The Times* was cursory, noting that it was "well introduced," while the *Morning Chronicle*, the *Examiner*, and the *Athenaeum*, as if taking their cue from Haydon's crowd, ignored it completely, despite its prominent place in the foreground.⁶⁵ Others found minor faults. The *Atlas*, which criticized the painting's verisimilitude, observed that "the Jack in the Green is adorned with flowers which never yet blossomed in May."⁶⁶ Similarly, the *Spectator* remarked on the incongruity of the sweep whose "feet in the tragic buskins look like those of a hero, when in face, action, and expression, and in every other respect, he is a chimney-sweep."⁶⁷ According to Haydon's diary, the unrealistic composition of the sweep was one reason why the king, who had already passed over *Chairing the Member*, refused to buy his third genre painting. Recalling the common practice of cross-dressing on May Day, Haydon wrote: "The King thought there was too much in the Punch. He admired excessively the apple girl, but thought the dancing chimney sweeper too much like an opera girl."⁶⁸

Haydon's figures were certainly idealized. The poverty and gaudiness that was emphasized by writers like Hazlitt and Hunt was registered in other contemporary images, such as George Cruikshank's "Sweeps on May Day" (1835) (fig. 3), but is absent from Haydon's painting. As Solkin notes, although the foreground is given over to impoverished Londoners—the fruit seller, the crossing sweeper, and the chimney sweeper—they "seem less problematic than picturesque."⁶⁹ This chimes with Lynda Nead's observation that the picturesque, a popular form in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, provided "a comfortable aesthetic experience." The sanitized trio of celebrants, who bear no sign of poverty except the Jack's naked feet, meet this criterion. They also fit the picturesque mode in other ways. In a metropolitan context, Nead argues that the picturesque in the late-Georgian period "came also to represent process and change, the last traces of the past in the present."⁷⁰ This contrast between

64. White, *London in the Nineteenth Century*, 391–92.

65. "Mr. Haydon's Pictures," *The Times*, 3.

66. "Mr. Haydon's Pictures," *Atlas*, 156.

67. "Mr. Haydon's Pictures," *Spectator*, 153.

68. Haydon, *The Diary of Benjamin Robert Haydon*, ed. Willard Bissell Pope, 5 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963), 3:428.

69. Solkin, *Painting Out of the Ordinary*, 229.

70. Nead, *Victorian Babylon: People, Streets and Images in Nineteenth-Century London* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2000), 32.

modernity and antiquity is evident in the juxtaposition of the fashionable Punch and Judy show and the May Day band, which although idealized is nonetheless a relic of ancient customs. Their vestigial status is established by their isolation. In marked contrast to Cruikshank's illustration, where the revelers are center stage, pursued by an eager crowd down the middle of a street, Haydon's trio are on the fringes, a much smaller group symbolically exiting the painting. Cruikshank's lively scene, reminiscent of the descriptions in newspaper and court reports, is much more representative of late-Georgian and early-Victorian pictures of London's May Day in which the Lord, Lady, and Jack-in-the-Green frequently provide a central focal point.⁷¹ Meanwhile, Haydon's composition seems to reflect the feelings of his literary friends and contemporaries—that the sweeps' May Day is old-fashioned and increasingly out of keeping with the modern city. This is confirmed by their presence in fashionable Marylebone, an area that had enjoyed investment and rapid development in the years following the end of the Napoleonic Wars: St Marylebone Church was completed in 1817.⁷²

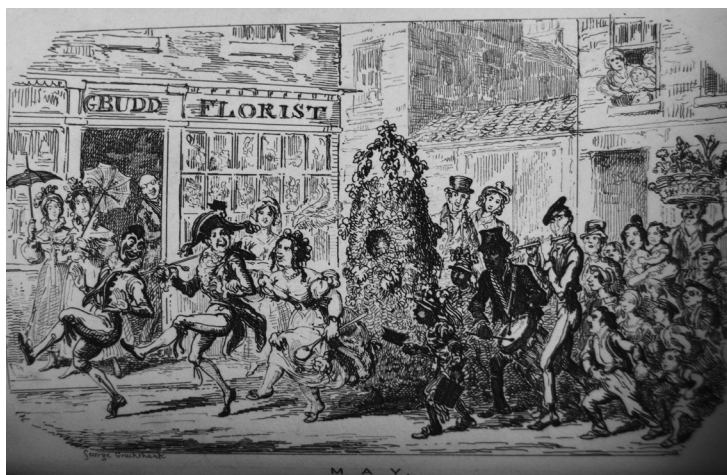


Figure 3. George Cruikshank, *Sweeps on May Day*, 1835, illustration, in *The Comic Almanack*, facing page 13, author's collection.

71. See, for example: Isaac Cruikshank, "May Day—or Jack in the Green," 1795, print, 19.8 x 24.8 cm, British Museum, London; G. Rymer, "Jack in the Green on the 1st of May," 1834, illustration in *London Scenes*, plate 5; Anonymous, *Sweeps' Day in Upper Lisson Street*, 1837–39, oil on canvas, 51 x 62 cm, Museum of London; Thomas Sevestre, "The Jack in the Green," 1850, watercolor, 18 x 12 cm, Victoria & Albert Museum, London.

72. Solkin, *Painting Out of the Ordinary*, 232.



Figure 4. Thomas Hood, *A May Duke*, 1832, illustration, in *Whims and Oddities*, 419, Cambridge University Library. Reproduced by kind permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

The picturesque representation of the sweep undercuts Haydon's critique of the climbing boys' condition, which is introduced through the commonplace analogy of the sweep's apprenticeship and slavery. Of all the characters in the scene, the boy most closely resembles the Black footman, a figure who mirrors him in both complexion and costume. Although the illegality of slavery in England had been established for over fifty years by 1829, the presence of slaves in London existed within living memory. Black servants were seen as status symbols in eighteenth-century England: in wealthy households enslaved men and boys were trained as footmen and pageboys, highly visible posts that advertised the family's

affluence.⁷³ The footman therefore evokes the condition of slavery even though audiences would have understood him to be free. Haydon even seems to have misappropriated some May Day traditions to make the boy's similarity to the servant complete by dressing him as the Lord of May. As Hone notes, the Lord of May wears "a huge cocked hat, fringed with yellow or red feathers, or laced with gold paper," a description that fits the hat worn by the boy. However, unlike the sweep, Hone relates that the Lord is typically a tall man from another trade and therefore not blackened with soot.⁷⁴ It is this version of the Lord that we see prancing in the foreground of Cruikshank's picture, arm in arm with the Lady of May. Haydon's amalgamation appears to be unique, although we see a sweep similarly decked out as a Lord in Thomas Hood's woodcut "A May-Duke" (fig. 4). Hood's image was partnered with his sketch "A May-Day" (1829) in the fourth edition of *Whims and Oddities*, published in 1832.⁷⁵ Hood may have known Haydon's *Punch*: he was another of Lamb's companions and the brother-in-law of John Hamilton Reynolds, one of Haydon's friends.

Haydon's pairing of the Black servant and the climbing boy may have been familiar to his first audience at the Western Exchange. Robert Cruikshank (George's brother), who provided illustrations for Montgomery's *The Chimney-Sweeper's Friend*, likewise made the comparison between slaves and sweeps by placing a Black servant alongside a climbing boy (fig. 5). However, unlike Haydon, Robert Cruikshank emphasized the pitiable condition of the apprentice, not only by dressing him in rags, but by drawing him in a position of supplication. This posture reinforces the parallels between apprenticeship and slavery: pleading with his head tilted up and his clasped hands raised before him, he bears a strong resemblance to the kneeling man in manacles embossed on Josiah Wedgwood's iconic *Am I Not a Man and a Brother?* anti-slavery medallions (fig. 6). Solkin argues that in *Punch* "any intended social critique has effectively been blunted by the May Day context with all of its exotic paraphernalia."⁷⁶ To some extent this is true, although it is Haydon's sanitized and picturesque depiction of May Day, rather than the May Day context itself, that strips the painting of its potential satirical power.

73. David Olusoga, *Black and British: A Forgotten History* (London: Pan Books, 2017), 86–91.

74. Hone, *The Every-Day Book and Table Book*, 1:584.

75. "A May-Day" and its accompanying sketch "A May-Duke" appear at the end of the second series, but are absent from the series' first edition (1827) and second edition (1829). They appear to have been included from 1832 when a fourth edition of *Whims and Oddities* was published and the first and second series appeared in one volume for the first time.

76. Solkin, *Painting Out of the Ordinary*, 230.



Figure 5. Robert Cruikshank, *The Petition of a Climbing Boy to a Noble Legislator*, 1824, illustration, in *The Chimney-Sweeper's Friend*, and *Climbing-Boy's Album*, facing page 363, Wellcome Collection. Reproduced with permission.



Figure 6. Josiah Wedgwood Factory, *Am I Not a Man and a Brother?*, ca.1787, jasperware, Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Reproduced with permission.

Although the sweep can be read as an ambivalent, even abortive critique, the May Day band nonetheless contributes meaningfully to one of the main themes in *Punch*: marriage. In his description of the painting, Haydon wrote: “The new-married couple are amiable, and anticipating, as they ought to be on entering a condition, which if happy, is the only evidence left us of lost paradise, and if unhappy, a certain anticipation of undiscovered hell.”⁷⁷ This “undiscovered hell” is represented by Punch and Judy. Rosalind Crone notes that Punch and Judy shows were versatile with characters and episodes changing in response to current events. However, “one episode consistently featured as part of the performance: Punch’s turbulent and violent relationship with his wife.” This episode, which Haydon depicts in his painting, was so widely popularized that “Punch and Judy became icons of marital conflict.”⁷⁸ If Punch and Judy are emblems of discord, then the May Day band embody youthfulness and lust, conditions that are conducive for marriage. Although May Day in Regency London was entangled with the circumstances of climbing boys, in its national context it was traditionally associated with springtime, youth, and renewal, and in the eighteenth century mock-marriage ceremonies were part of May Day celebrations. It is therefore fitting that Haydon’s revelers are in close proximity to the marriage coach, heading in the same direction and almost leading it out of the picture. May Day was also traditionally a time of sexual desire, an association that translated into an assumption that May Queens were promiscuous.⁷⁹ This was in the mind of the *Spectator*’s reviewer who commented on the “bouncing good-looking May-queen—or *quean* rather” (a quean is a prostitute).⁸⁰ This sexually-charged interpretation of the Lady of May, a woman that Haydon described as “good looking but vulgar,” chimes with the amorous groom who looks longingly at his bride as well as Haydon’s euphemistic remark that they “are amiable, and anticipating.”⁸¹

Haydon’s exhibition at the Western Exchange closed on May 19, 1830. He had earned 114 pounds from ticket and catalogue sales, but still found himself forty-eight pounds in debt for outstanding rent. This was one of many unpaid bills and Haydon was soon confined in the King’s Bench, again. A couple of months later, *Punch*—his only valuable asset—was ransomed to his creditors and secured his release from prison.⁸² Although Haydon made other brief forays into genre painting, notably *Waiting for the Times* (1831), this was his last Hogarthian

77. [Haydon], “Description of Eucles,” 9.

78. Crone, “Mr and Mrs Punch,” 1057.

79. Paul Griffiths, *Youth and Authority: Formative Experiences in England, 1560–1640* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 145; Joshua, *The Romantics and the May Day Tradition*, 16–20.

80. “Mr. Haydon’s Pictures,” *Spectator*, 152.

81. Haydon, *The Diary of Benjamin Robert Haydon*, 3:394.

82. Paul O’Keeffe, *A Genius for Failure: The Life of Benjamin Robert Haydon* (London: The Bodley Head, 2009), 285, 295; Tom Taylor, *Life of Benjamin Robert Haydon*,

attempt to capture metropolitan society in the round. Gregory Dart observes that in *The Mock Election* we see “metropolitan performers of every kind, all unexpectedly levelled by debt and imprisonment”; in *Punch* we see a similar range of characters united by the popular puppet in the public venue of the street.⁸³

In this scene the May Day revelers are charged, arguably overcharged, with meaning. Placed prominently in the foreground but conspicuously ignored, they serve as a token of London’s past; this depiction jars with newspaper and court reports that described crowds following Jack-in-the-Green, but echoes Hunt and others who represented the festivities as remnants of an ancient tradition. Haydon also gestures toward the oppression of climbing boys, a social evil that attracted the attention of Hazlitt, Hunt, and Lamb. However, unlike these essayists, Haydon did not dress his sweep in rags, but portrayed him as part of a picturesque band, a choice that undercut his social critique but allowed the celebrants to serve as a springtime symbol of concupiscence. Haydon’s representation of the revelers is ambitious, haphazard, highly idiosyncratic, but draws together some of the key themes attached to May Day in Romantic culture. Noticeably, he does not engage with the beggary, criminality, and social disorder that contemporaries also associated with London’s May Day. Such associations are more evident in Cruikshank’s “Sweeps on May Day” where the jiggling clown, arching on a tip-toe to look back at the crowd, draws our eyes to a pack of children surging past the musicians with breathless expressions that might be excited or angry. The uncertainty and dynamism that this creates provides an impending sense of tumult that is quite absent from Haydon’s static crowd where even the thieves are on display and carefully watched. Connell and Leask comment that “the uncontainable multiplicity of urban life entrances the viewer of Haydon’s *Punch*,” but in contrast to Cruikshank’s image, Haydon’s London seems quite quiet, almost tame.⁸⁴

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83. Dart, *Metropolitan Art and Literature*, 198.

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