

Why do we say ‘hanged, drawn and quartered?’

I was writing a book recently which touched on executions in 1563. In it I referred to criminals being ‘drawn, hanged and quartered’. In every instance the copyeditor (not a historian) changed this to the more usual ‘hanged, drawn and quartered’. Her reason for ‘correcting’ me was her understanding that ‘drawing’ meant taking out the guts of a condemned criminal after hanging him. Therefore ‘hanging’ had to appear first. But was she right? And, if not, why do we say ‘hanged, drawn and quartered?’

The current (online) edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* preserves the unaltered text of the second edition (1989). Under the word ‘draw’, the fourth definition it gives is as follows: ‘To drag (a criminal) at a horse’s tail, or on a hurdle or the like, to the place of execution; formerly a legal punishment of high treason.’ The etymological examples cited are all unambiguous. For instance: Hall’s chronicle (1548) states that a man was sentenced ‘after the fassyon of treytours to be drawn, hanged and quartred’; and the *Dict. Nat. Biog* (1890) is quoted to the effect that Garnett ‘was sentenced to be drawn, hanged, disembowelled, and quartered.’ With plenty of examples from the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, all of which mention ‘drawn’ before ‘hanged’, this description of the ritual death penalty for traitors clearly has a usage as old or older than the one with which we are more familiar today.

With regard to the ‘disembowelling’ definition of ‘draw’ (definition no. 50), the *OED* is much less certain. The second and third eds read:

To draw out the viscera or intestines of; to disembowel (a fowl, etc. before cooking, a traitor or other criminal after hanging). In many cases of executions it is uncertain whether this, or sense 4, is meant. The presumption is that where *drawn* is mentioned after *hanged*, the sense is as here.

Note that this is based on a ‘presumption’. Several etymological examples follow, in which evisceration is clearly meant with regard to cooking fowl. But not executing traitors. In fact, in at least one of the examples cited to support the idea that ‘draw’ meant disembowelment, no evisceration took place at all: Roger Mortimer may have been ‘hanged and drawn’ for treason in 1330 but the drawing was done on an ox hide. Afterwards he was left hanging on the gallows for two days. No one cut his guts open afterwards, so this was an incorrect interpretation by the *OED* editors, based solely on the order of the words. Significantly, none of the other execution-related examples mention evisceration either.

- **c1320** *Sir Tristr.* 1797 Sche swore bi godes rode ai schuld ben hong and drain.
- **1375** BARBOUR *Bruce*, I. 278 Sum thai hangyt, and sum thai drew.
- **1465** *Paston Lett.* I. No. 99. 135, I was arestyd..and was thretenyd to have ben hongyd, drawn, and qarteryd.
- **1556** *Chron. Gr. Friars in Monumenta Franciscana* (Rolls) II. 152 Thys yere was Roger Mortemer erle of March hangyd and drawne at Tyborne for tresoun.
- **1682** S. PORDAGE *Medal Rev.* 178 Those men, whom they can neither hang nor draw.

This is not to say that evisceration did not take place – it did, in many cases. Jean de Waurin’s description of the drawing, hanging, evisceration and decapitation of Sir Thomas Blount in 1400 is particularly detailed (Hardy and Hardy (eds), *Waurin 1399-1422* (Rolls Ser.), pp. 39-41). But the

evisceration of a criminal does not appear to have been described as ‘drawing’ before modern times. Indeed, it would appear that the only reason for this definition being in *OED* is the editor’s attempt to explain why the well-worn phrase places ‘hanging’ before ‘drawing’. His ‘presumption’ is entirely predicated by the word order of the modern cliché: applying the ‘evisceration’ interpretation to the drawing of criminals allowed him to explain it. But it is only one interpretation and has no direct supporting evidence, only the circumstantial evidence that evisceration took place in some cases.

This leaves us with a distinctly dubious basis for believing that ‘drawing’ was regularly used to denote the removal of the guts of traitors. A more likely reason for ‘drawing’ being often mentioned after ‘hanging’ is because it was a supplementary aspect of the punishment. As the next example will show, this was indeed sometimes the case: death was the main punishment, being ‘drawn’ to the gallows like a traitor simply an added humiliation.

A good contemporary English source for the use of the word ‘drawn’ in the context of executions in 1563 is the chronicle of Henry Machyn, 1550-1563, a humble London parish clerk. This is freely available in a new online edition, entitled ‘A London Provisioner’s Chronicle, 1550-1563, by Henry Machyn’, being a joint publication of the University of Michigan Press and the Scholarly Publishing Office of the University of Michigan Library (<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/machyn/>). Machyn notes that a certain Mr. William Thomas was arraigned at the London Guildhall in May 1554 ‘and cast to suffer death, to be drawn and quartered.’ A few days later, we read in the same source that ‘The eighteenth day of May was drawn upon a sled a particular man named William Thomas, from the Tower unto Tyburn, the allegation of treason. He was clerk to the council. And he was hanged and after his head struck off and then quartered. And the morrow after his head was set on London Bridge and three quarters set over Cripplegate.’ This is pretty conclusive. In the first instance, the ‘drawing’ is mentioned second as a corollary to the death penalty. The second entry shows unequivocally that the ‘drawing’ related to his being dragged to the place of execution, not a process of disembowelling.

One could look further – but trusting that the *OED* editors would have called our attention to any specifically gut-wrenching uses of the word ‘draw’, if they had found any, it is probably unnecessary. It seems that definition no. 50 in *OED* is distinctly dubious. Rather, in Henry Machyn’s humble chronicle we have an answer to the question: why is it ‘hanging, drawing and quartering’?. To specify the ‘drawing’ was simply to accentuate the treasonable nature of the crime. It did not automatically imply that the victim was disembowelled as well.

Ian Mortimer

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