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‘A book in his hand, – but it couldn’t be a prayer-book’, the Self-Awareness of  
William Harrison Ainsworth’s Newgate Novels

Introduction

In 1840, *The Times* published a letter by William Harrison Ainsworth in defence of his novel *Jack Sheppard* (1839-40). In it Ainsworth addresses persistent accusations that his tale, a romantic account of the famous eighteenth-century housebreaker, actively encouraged its readers to turn to crime. The necessity for this public justification of his writing was due to the apparent vindication of these accusations. On the 5<sup>th</sup> May Lord William Russell had his throat slit by his valet, François Benjamin Courvoisier, who, it was reported by *The Times*, ‘frequently, too, declared that he was indebted for the idea of committing this atrocious crime to *Jack Sheppard*’.<sup>1</sup>

Ainsworth refuted this claim, bemoaning the ‘virulent and libellous attack upon my romance’.<sup>2</sup> However, he also suggested another literary suspect:

‘A collection of lives of noted malefactors (probably the *Newgate Calendar*) had, indeed, fallen his way; but the account of Jack Sheppard contained in this series had not particularly attracted his attention’.<sup>3</sup>

Ainsworth’s argument is not that Courvoisier was not induced to murder by a book, but that Courvoisier was not induced by his book; rather than deny literary influence, he merely implicates another potential literary target. Ainsworth is quite willing to accept the concept of corrupting literature, and this suspicion of literature is propounded by *Jack Sheppard* itself, as well as Ainsworth’s earlier novel *Rookwood*

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<sup>1</sup> [Anon.], ‘The Convict Courvoisier’, *The Times*, 25 June 1840, p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> W. Harrison Ainsworth, ‘To The Editor Of The Times’, *The Times*, 7 July 1840, p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

(1834). This paper establishes that Ainsworth's additions to what would be called Newgate novels utilised the idea that they could affect their readers. Ainsworth's fiction is not so much preoccupied with criminals as with criminal literature; with their depictions of unmanageable and unruly reading materials they work to ironically endorse and exploit anxieties contingent on new developments in the production and consumption of popular literature.

Newgate's generic status is an unstable one. The standard definition is, as Keith Hollingsworth puts it, that 'an important character came (or, if imaginary, might have come) out of the Newgate Calendar', the name given to various collections of the lives of famous criminals, which can be traced back to 1773, and which in turn takes its name from London's Newgate prison.<sup>4</sup> Practically, this is applied to a specific collection of novels, usually made up of *Paul Clifford* (1830) and *Eugene Aram* (1832) by Edward Bulwer Lytton, *Rookwood* and *Jack Sheppard* by Ainsworth, *Oliver Twist* by Charles Dickens (1839-40), *Catherine* (1839-40) by William Makepeace Thackeray (despite it being an attempt to satirise the genre), and concluding with Bulwer Lytton's *Lucretia* (1846).<sup>5</sup> However, the parity of fiction and reality, and the varying nature of the criminal character's narrative importance, makes Newgate an unavoidably ill-defined term. Hollingsworth further notes that: 'most of [the Newgate novels] met strong opposition on the ground of morality or taste. [...] the general objection was that they familiarised their readers with vice and crime, perhaps

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<sup>4</sup> See Keith Hollingsworth, *The Newgate Novel, 1830-47* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1963), p. 14.

<sup>5</sup> Hollingsworth suggests the potential inclusion of Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* and Dickens's *Barnaby Rudge* to this list, despite noting that *Barnaby Rudge* was not called a Newgate novel by its reviewers, Hollingsworth, p.177.

to a degree socially dangerous'.<sup>6</sup> There is no doubt, for Hollingsworth at least, that if Newgate is a distinct genre, it is 'a school defined by its contemporary critics'.<sup>7</sup>

Yet this use of criminals cannot really be what was new about Newgate. Louis James notes the significance of a 'criminal literature trade' in the eighteenth century, recording the lives, and deaths, of notable criminals, with the resulting broadsheets and ballad magazines forming 'the ground from which periodical fiction grew'.<sup>8</sup> It is these texts, like the Newgate Calendar, that many 'lower-class publishers' of the 1830s looked to for inspiration and material for their market.<sup>9</sup>

In identifying concerns over Newgate as 'an attempt to define and delineate the powerful new genre, the novel', in the context of increased literacy and the developments of the publishing trade, Juliet John highlights the self-reflexivity of these works. A close reading of *Jack Sheppard*, *Rookwood*, and *Oliver Twist* reveals that they must be seen as engaging with the reputation of the genre in a way that is distinct from other Newgate texts. They acknowledge their own position within and contribution to a tradition of criminal literature, the increasing mass market documented by James, and debates about the influence and danger of an emergent popular culture.

Matthew Buckley notes this, positing that *Jack Sheppard* is involved in 'driving, and not simply describing or reflecting, the crucial shift from political to perceptual modernity', defined by shifts in 'print technology, literary media, reading practices, and audience composition'.<sup>10</sup> However, the extent to which *Jack Sheppard*

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 14-15.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 14.

<sup>8</sup> Louis James, *Fiction for the Working Man, 1830-1850* (London: Oxford University Press), p. 156; p.151.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p.24.

<sup>10</sup> Matthew Buckley, 'Sensations of Celebrity: Jack Sheppard and the Mass Audience', *Victorian Studies*, 44:3 (2002), 423-463 (426; p. 425).

and *Rookwood* engage with this modernity bears examination: here I will demonstrate how rigorously they go about portraying and, in places, criticising their own literary culture. It is both a manifesto for the dangers of literature, and an ironic animation of the public perception of those dangers.

### I. 'The march of knowledge': Newgate literature and modernity

S. M. Ellis, Ainsworth's biographer, recounts Theodore Martin's response to 'Nix My Dolly, Pals, Fake Away', a song from *Rookwood* made popular by its inclusion in J. B. Buckstone's stage adaptation of *Jack Sheppard*: 'my astonished ears have often heard it; it was whistled by every dirty guttersnipe, and chanted in drawing rooms by fair lips, little knowing the meaning of the words they sang'.<sup>11</sup> This literary association of potentially criminal youth with genteel women signals how earlier eighteenth-century and Romantic concerns about literary influence are supplanted by those of *Jack Sheppard*.

Buckley highlights the 'unsettling dislocations' in 'the decades after 1789', suggesting an idea of 'modernity' that is bound up with issues of the production and consumption of print media.<sup>12</sup> Lauren Gillingham suggests that Newgate substituted the 'construct of a low-born male reader and theatregoer for the eighteenth century's idle female reader from the leisured classes'.<sup>13</sup> It is from here that Martin's drawing-room ladies have their origin, signalling what Gillingham calls Newgate's 'domestication of romance patterns to ever lower segments of society'.<sup>14</sup> Gillingham draws on Clifford Siskin, who notes the concerns about the potential of novels to

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<sup>11</sup> S.M. Ellis, *William Harrison Ainsworth and His Friends*, 2 vols (London: John Lane, 1911), I, p. 366.

<sup>12</sup> Buckley, p. 424.

<sup>13</sup> Lauren Gillingham, 'Ainsworth's Jack Sheppard and the Crimes of History', *Studies in English Literature 1500-1900*, 49:4 (2009), 879-906 (p. 884).

<sup>14</sup> Gillingham, p. 884.

produce a ‘change’ in the women who read them,<sup>15</sup> and Ina Ferris, who highlights the conceptualising of a ‘generic young female reader’<sup>16</sup> receiving ‘instruction’ from novels.<sup>17</sup>

Siskin contends that the 1830s was ‘a kind of watershed’ ushering in the ‘modern [...] world of print’, a modernity defined by the ‘fully mechanized’ printing and distribution process, the pricing for a mass market of the resultant products, and the hierarchization of levels of ‘culture’.<sup>18</sup> Louis James and John Springhall have highlighted the emergence of a new urban working-class mass market for literature, as well as a specific popular culture designed to appeal to it, and which came to represent it. The ‘threat’ of this modernity is defined by Lucy Newlyn as an ‘information overload’.<sup>19</sup> Newlyn sees a fear of the ‘unmanageable excess’ of unlegislated literature as bound up in Romantic ideas of unhealthy influence, with the gendering of indiscriminate readers of harmful material, as well as of excessive writers, as feminine.<sup>20</sup> In *Jack Sheppard*, and *Rookwood* we can see this same anxious modernity, haunted by unregulateable popular media.

However, the violent thrills offered by Newgate owe their resonance to political as well as industrial changes. For James, this shift in popular print culture, with a surge in cheap periodicals provided ‘great opportunities for directing the radical movement’.<sup>21</sup> The Seditious Publications Act of 1820 is testament to the

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<sup>15</sup> Clifford Siskin, *The Work of Writing: Literature and Social Change in Britain, 1700-1830* (Baltimore, John Hopkins University Press, 1998), p. 3.

<sup>16</sup> Ina Ferris, *The Achievement of Literary Authority* (Ithaca, NY; London: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 33. Ferris cites a review of Maria Edgeworth’s *Tales of Fashionable Life* in *Quarterly Review*, 2 (1809), p. 146.

<sup>17</sup> Ferris, p.33. Ferris cites a review of Sydney Owenson’s *Wild Irish Girl* in *Monthly Review*, 57 (1808), p. 378.

<sup>18</sup> Siskin, p. 11; p. 11; p. 11; p. 12. This is also noted by James.

<sup>19</sup> Lucy Newlyn, *Reading, Writing, and Romanticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 39; p. 40.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 42-3.

<sup>21</sup> James, p. 12.

extent to which the literary market had already been associated with potential social risk, and, in the shadow of revolution in France and public rioting associated with the rejection of the 1831 Reform Bill, the 1830s saw an increase in radical publications. It is this with which Ainsworth's Newgate novels engage, depicting a mass susceptible to literary influence.

Even before the murder of Russell, sections of the press concurred with the *Athenaeum's* view of *Jack Sheppard* as 'a bad book [...] got up for a bad public', and condemned its 'graphic representations' as liable to elicit 'unnatural excitement'.<sup>23</sup> Ironically, this review appeared beside an advertisement for the three-volume edition of *Jack Sheppard*. On 9<sup>th</sup> July 1840 a letter appeared in *The Times* by William Evans, Sherriff of London and Middlesex, responding to Ainsworth's letter of 7<sup>th</sup> July. Evans reiterated an earlier claim that 'Courvoisier did assert to me that the idea of murdering his master was first suggested to him by a perusal of the book called Jack Sheppard'.<sup>24</sup> Printing both letters, the *Examiner* deigned to 'acquit' Ainsworth of intending to advocate murder, but restated its view that 'the admiration of the criminal is the studied purpose of the book'.<sup>25</sup> As Stephen James Carver notes, such concern was tied to 'the attendant fear of the new urban working classes'.<sup>26</sup>

That these misgivings existed before the death of Russell is further demonstrated by a cartoon in the *Penny Satirist* (a self-proclaimed 'cheap substitute for a weekly newspaper'), noted and reproduced by Buckley, called 'The March of Knowledge: Or Just Come From Seeing Jack Sheppard'. In it five youths walk past a wall covered in adverts for theatrical adaptations of *Jack Sheppard*, expressing views

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<sup>23</sup> [Anon.], 'Jack Sheppard: A Romance', *Athenaeum*, 26 October 1839, 803-5 (p. 803).

<sup>24</sup> William Evans, 'To the Editor of The Times', *The Times*, 9 July 1840, p.5

<sup>25</sup> [Anon.], 'Courvoisier and Jack Sheppard', *Examiner*, 12 July 1840, p. 434.

<sup>26</sup> Stephen James Carver, *The Life and Works of the Lancashire Novelist William Harrison Ainsworth, 1850-1882* (Lampeter: Edwin Mellen Press, 2003), p. 225.

such as ‘Blow’d if I shouldn’t just like to be another *Jack Sheppard* – it only wants a little pluck to begin with’.<sup>27</sup> On 8<sup>th</sup> December 1839, the *Examiner* published an article in which children found guilty of burglary are called ‘JUVENILE JACK SHEPPARDS’,<sup>28</sup> and a report of an apprentice on a coasting vessel having robbed his workmates: ‘three of the complainants, who went on Tuesday night to the gallery of the Surrey Theatre, to witness the performance of *Jack Sheppard* and there met with the prisoner rigged out in their best clothes’.<sup>29</sup>

These fears relate to the various stage adaptations of *Jack Sheppard*, and focus on its extra-literary life, rather than condemning the novel itself. This is reflected in Thackeray’s oft-quoted concern about ‘Sheppard bags’, containing equipment for house breaking, being sold in the lobbies of theatres.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, Hollingsworth suggests that ‘the theatres were chiefly responsible’ for critical anxieties.<sup>31</sup> Such theatricals made the Newgate tale more accessible to a less literate, and thus wider, mass market. No wonder then that then they attracted concern.

The importance of the Courvoisier case was that he forced these fears to be concentrated back on Ainsworth’s novel. The *Examiner*, on 28<sup>th</sup> June, citing Courvoisier’s reported confession, damned *Jack Sheppard* as ‘a publication calculated to familiarise the mind with cruelties and to serve as the cut-throat’s manual, or the midnight assassin’s *vade-mecum*’.<sup>32</sup> Six days after Courvoisier was executed it

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<sup>27</sup> [Anon.], ‘The March of Knowledge: Or Just Come From Seeing Jack Sheppard’, *Penny Satirist*, 14 December 1839, p. 1. It says something about the equivocal reception of *Jack Sheppard* that on 9 November of the same year the *Penny Satirist* had devoted its title page to a set of engravings advertising J. B. Buckstone’s production of *Jack Sheppard*, playing at the Adelphi, stating that ‘all the former crimes [...] are forgotten in the sympathy of the moment’. [Anon.], ‘Jack Sheppard, Now Performing at the Adelphi Theatre, London’, *Penny Satirist*, 09 November 1839, p. 1.

<sup>28</sup> [Anon.], ‘Juvenile Jack Sheppards’, *Examiner*, 8 December 1839, p. 778.

<sup>29</sup> ‘A Seafaring Jack Sheppard’, *Examiner*, 8 December 1839, p. 778. Ironically, the same issue also ran an advert for the ‘Last Twelve Nights of the Unrivalled Jack Sheppard’ at the Theatre Royal Adelphi, on p. 781.

<sup>30</sup> *Letters and Private Papers of William Makepeace Thackeray*, ed. by Gordon N. Ray, 4 vols (London, 1945-6), I, p. 395.

<sup>31</sup> Hollingsworth, p. 140.

<sup>32</sup> [Anon.], ‘Mr Phillips’s Defence of Courvoisier’, *Examiner*, 28 June 1840, p. 402.



insisted that *Jack Sheppard* was a publication ‘calculated to create a lust for cruelty in minds having any predisposition to vice’.<sup>33</sup> The interaction between the text and Courvoisier’s alleged claims cements its position as a specific literary test case. However, Newgate’s preoccupation with textual modernity and mass markets is, in fact, perspicaciously established five years earlier by *Rookwood*.

## II. ‘You appear to be my reader’: *Rookwood* and literary competition

*Rookwood*, Ainsworth’s first Newgate novel, is the story of the poor and illegitimate Luke Bradley who, aided by his sinister grandfather, seeks to usurp his honourable brother Ranulph Rookwood, and his sinister mother, as the heir to the deceased Lord Piers Rookwood. Luke turns to the famous highwayman Dick Turpin for help, while Turpin himself attempts to evade capture. *Rookwood* did not meet with the sort of critical opposition that *Jack Sheppard* would.<sup>34</sup> And yet, as Carver notes, its ‘allegiance’ to, and association with, criminal texts of the previous century, suggests that it needs to be read as being aware of its own position in popular culture.<sup>35</sup> *Rookwood* portrays an awareness, and wariness, of the uncontrollable literary industry of the 1830s.

It signals this with the literary status of Turpin, the novel’s popular supporting character, and one taken straight out of the Newgate Calendar. At one point, we are told that his criminal endeavours are achieved with the help of ‘a book [...] which he constructed, and carried constantly about his person’, and which records ‘every cross-road in the neighbourhood of the metropolis [...] as well as with many other parts of

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<sup>33</sup> ‘Courvoisier and Jack Sheppard’, *Examiner*, 12 July 1840, p. 434.

<sup>34</sup> Hollingworth, pp. 106-9; Carver, p.170.

<sup>35</sup> Carver, p. 6.

England'.<sup>36</sup> Curiously, this detail is not found in the 1836 edition of the novel, but has been added by the 1849 publication. It seems that Ainsworth, in the intervening years, and after the critical attacks on *Jack Sheppard*, saw fit to turn Turpin into a criminal writer, allowing him to function as a pointedly satirical figure. This later addition suggests the way in which the 1834 text should be read. The highwayman is pitted against another cipher for authorship: Mr Codicil Coates 'clerk of the peace, attorney-at-law, bailiff, and receiver' (40). Coates, embodying legally sanctioned, authoritative literature, battles and is bested by the more transgressive Newgate stylings of Turpin.

The 'swivel-eyed quill-driver' Coates is an ineffectual thief taker (93), lacking the vitality of Turpin, yet has written (but apparently not sent) a letter about Turpin, 'to the editor of the common sense' (58), expressing his dissatisfaction that the highwayman has not yet been apprehended.<sup>37</sup> Despite Coates's reading of his letter in an 'authoritative tone' (58), his authorial efforts to suppress the romantic tales of the highwayman are also ineffectual. Indeed, in reading out the letter for Turpin's amusement Coates is ironically telling a captivating tale of crime for an appreciative audience; Newgate, it seems, infects even those who disapprove of its narrative allure. Turpin, by his singing of ballads about highwaymen to willing audiences, attempts to wrest control of the cultural productions of his reputation. He sings 'ONE FOOT IN THE STIRRUP; or, Turpin's First Fling' to 'uproarious applause' (95) at Sir Piers Rookwood's funeral: Turpin's Newgate thrills subvert the expected sombre tone of the occasion's conventional discourse.

The plot of *Rookwood* is driven by the passing, hiding and possession of papers which impact on legitimacy and inheritance. Even characters that are more

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<sup>36</sup> Ainsworth, *Rookwood: A Romance* (London: George Routledge, [1890]), p. 166. Further references to this edition will be given, in parenthesis, in the text.

<sup>37</sup> Presumably *Common Sense: or, The Englishman's Journal*. Turpin reads the more subversive *Fog's Journal*.

obstreperous than villainous, such as Dr Polycarp Small and his clerk Zachariah Trundletext, have names which remind us of the novel's literary preoccupations. The reading of palms by Barbara Lovel (the 'Gipsy Queen' and mother of Luke's betrothed) also attests to the textual relevance of the characters themselves, with bodies being read to establish the future of the narrative, just as that narrative is dependent on the correct or incorrect reading of the papers which drive it. Bodies and texts find parity in decipherability.

In this way the potential misreading and misuse of texts and the potential criminality of their readers are cast as part of the same process. Carver's reading of *Jack Sheppard* notes the extent to which the Jack's body is subjected to anxious interpretation, which he notes grants Jack 'the physiognomy of the criminal type'.<sup>38</sup> When read alongside Jack's own collection of Newgate Calendars this, for Carver, has the effect of 'ironically confirming the argument later used against Ainsworth that such literature corrupts'.<sup>39</sup> As in *Jack Sheppard*, *Rookwood* sees this kind of physiognomical reading tied up with literary environments, most explicitly with the character of the criminal ferryman Conkey Jem, whose rude hut is decorated with

a gallery of choicely-illustrated ballads, celebrating the exploits of various highwaymen, renowned in song, amongst which our friend Dick Turpin figured conspicuously [...] with a pistol considerably longer than the arm that sustained it (300).

Jem himself is subsequently described in detail:

the animal predominating throughout; his eyes were small, red, and wolfish [...] teeth projected, like the tusks of a boar, from out his coarse-lipped, sensual mouth.(300).

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<sup>38</sup> Carver, p. 206.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

Whether a symptom of reading, or the cause of it, Jem's degenerate physicality at least invites the uneasy association of criminal literature and criminal behaviour.

On capturing Coates, and taking his pocket-book, or 'reader' (232), Turpin compels him to 'reluctantly' sign a bill of exchange, 'for 500l., payable *on demand*' (232), essentially co-authoring criminal writing, and controlling the reading of the bill, for his own unlawful, albeit anti-heroic, ends. Finding a letter from Lady Rookwood in the pocket book, he undertakes an illicit reading of this confidential text. Turpin's quip that 'I must detain your *reader* a moment longer' is met with Coates's riposte: 'you should take care of yourself then [...] *You* appear to be my reader' (232). Each character is a text to be read, and an audience to interpret the texts they encounter and claim. One only needs to look at Conkey Jem's inaccurate picture of Turpin to see how slippery literary representations are.

*Rookwood* wryly anticipates, the anxieties produced by a growing popular culture industry that would lead to, and define, the controversy around *Jack Sheppard*, ones that had their roots in the radical publications and public unrest of the early 1830s. In Coates's failed attempt to suppress Turpin, symbol of the Newgate tale, we see the efforts of the bourgeois establishment to suppress a growing literary culture over which they had decreasing control. *Rookwood* acknowledges the changing nature of popular writing, and the beginnings of the anxieties which it would ironically contribute to. As a result, in *Rookwood* we find a proliferation of transgressive literature that evades establishment control, and is associated with crime.

This preoccupation with interpretation is significant, as *Rookwood*'s reception emphasises the importance of *Jack Sheppard*. While anticipating the themes of influential criminal literature that *Jack Sheppard* would go on to more fully explore, *Rookwood* does not seem to have been subjected to the same criticism as *Jack*

*Sheppard*. However, by the time that Edward Bulwer Lytton's *Lucretia* (1846) was published, the conception of Newgate novels as dangerous was established, attested to by the *Athenaeum*'s calling *Lucretia* 'a bad book of a bad school'.<sup>40</sup> *Jack Sheppard*, it seems, was key in bringing about this change of critical view towards the Newgate genre.

### III. 'Scored all over with grotesque designs': *Jack Sheppard*'s literary environments

The plot of *Jack Sheppard* tells the fictionalised story of Jack's descent into crime, his criminal exploits and his eventual hanging. Intertwined with this narrative is that of his childhood companion Thames Darrel, and Thames's reclaiming, with Jack's help, of his noble birthright from his uncle, Sir Rowland Trenchard. Upon first encountering the protagonists Owen Wood's carpentry workshop it is clear that the two are set upon different paths. As both Carver and Simon Joyce have noted, the overt evocation of Hogarth's *Industry and Idleness* makes it clear that the handsome Thames will be rewarded for his decency, and that a life of crime and eventual death await Jack.<sup>41</sup> The boys' playroom is split down the middle, one half devoted to the interests of either boy. Thames's shelves contain *Plutarch's Lives* and *True Protestant Gratitude, or Britain's Thanksgiving for the First of August, being the Day of His Majesty's Happy Accession to the Throne*, 'the fine old ballad of *'St. George for England'*', 'the Carpenter's Manual', and 'a Treatise on Trigonometry and Geometry'.<sup>42</sup> Jack's contrasting library contains the chronicles of famous criminals,

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<sup>40</sup> [Anon.], 'Lucretia: or, The Children of the Night', *Athenaeum*, 5 December 1846, 1240-1241 (p. 1240).

<sup>41</sup> Simon Joyce, *Capital Offences: Geographies of Class and Crime in Victorian London* (Charlottesville; London: University of Virginia Press, 2003), pp. 89 & 94. Indeed, the chapter in which Thames and Jack are introduced is called 'The Idle Apprentice'; Carver, p. 206.

<sup>42</sup> William Harrison Ainsworth, *Jack Sheppard: A Romance* (London: G. Routledge and sons, [1890], p. 86. Further references to this edition will be given, in parenthesis, in the text.

while pasted to his wall are ‘flash songs’ such as *The Thief Catcher’s Prophecy* (86). The reader is presented with a connection between reading material and criminality, and the novel clearly displays a self-reflexive sensitivity to its own place in a shifting modernity of print.

This can be found even earlier, when we meet Jack’s mother, holding the infant Jack, in an overtly literary room:

the bare walls were scored all over with grotesque designs, the chief of which represented the punishment of Nebuchadnezzar. The rest were hieroglyphic characters, executed in red chalk and charcoal [...] Over the chimney piece was a handbill, purporting to be “*The last Dying Speech and Confession of TOM SHEPPARD, the Notorious Housebreaker, who suffered at Tyburn on the 25<sup>th</sup> February 1703.*” This placard was adorned with a rude wood cut, representing the unhappy malefactor at the place of execution [...] beneath these prints, a cluster of hobnails, driven into the wall, formed certain letters which if properly deciphered produced the words, “*Paul Groves, cobbler,*” and under the name, traced in charcoal, appeared the following record of the poor fellow’s fate, “*Hung himself in this rum for luv off licker,*” accompanied by a graphic sketch of the unhappy suicide dangling from a beam’. (2-3)

The room is essentially constructed out of reading material: the very environment is a criminal text. The narrator’s anxiety about the letters being ‘properly deciphered’ signals a concern about the ability of consumers to tell beneficial from harmful reading, or to read potentially suspect texts in a reliable and safe way.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> For example, the *Athenaeum*’s worry that although Dickens’s works leave ‘an intelligent reader [...] wiser and better’ for reading them, ‘this is precisely the excellence which we suspect the readers of Boz most frequently overlook; and we are certain that it is far less the under-current of philosophy which has sold his book, than the strong flavour of the medium, in which he has disguised the bitterness of its taste’. ‘Jack Sheppard: A Romance’, pp. 803-4.

According to Buckley, the scene of the playroom, as well as George Cruikshank's later illustration 'The Vindictiveness of Jack Sheppard', with its depiction of its wall plastered with literature, work by 'invoking the competing visual economy of the new mass press'.<sup>44</sup> Such scenes as this represent 'a space in which identity itself becomes increasingly contained, and confined, by print culture [...] an almost existential imprisonment within the mediated perceptual world of mass-produced images'.<sup>45</sup> These signifiers of mass-produced text and illustration, forming the very walls of the building, threaten to turn their readers into criminals, an effect implied by the floor of Jack's mother's room: 'rotten [...] the boards of the floor presented a very insecure footing' (2). Its insecurity hints at the Tyburn gallows on which Jack dies, and the role of mass-produced literature in putting him there.

The *Penny Satirist*'s use of 'knowledge' has connotations of morally correct and incorrect reading, calling to mind the biblical tree of the knowledge of good and evil. It is the novel's habit of referring to the gallows as a 'tree' which cements this association, and raises the issue of the literary licensing of evil.<sup>46</sup> The reference to Nebuchadnezzar acts as further validation, the madness of whom foreshadows that of Mrs Sheppard: her fate is literally dictated by the literary environment that surrounds her. Just as the juveniles of the *Penny Satirist* are given the knowledge of, and inclination for, evil by *Jack Sheppard* playbills, and just as Conkey Jem has his crimes signalled by his décor, so too is Jack influenced from childhood by similar wall-coverings of uncontrollable literature: the cartoon is merely reproducing what the

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<sup>44</sup> Buckley, p. 446.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 458.

<sup>46</sup> The same usage is found in *Rookwood*, when Dick Turpin mounts 'the fatal tree', and when Peter Bradley raises a toast to 'the tree that bears fruit all the year round, and yet has neither bark nor branch'. Francis Grose, *1811 Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue* (Adelaide: Bibliophile; London: Papermac, 1981) includes the phrase 'Gregorian Tree' as a term for the gallows. *Rookwood* explicitly cites Grose's dictionary as a source for its criminal terminology.

novel is depicting. There remains, however, the issue of whether Jack's fascination with deviant literature is the cause or symptom of delinquency.

References to physiognomy throughout the novel would seem to reinforce the idea that criminal literature is merely symptomatic. We are told that Jack's 'physiognomy resembled one of those vagabond heads which Murillo delighted to paint, [...] faces that almost make one in love with roguery' (54-5). Gillingham gestures towards this in her emphasis on 'the novel's obsession with the potency of Jack's genetic legacy from his criminal father',<sup>47</sup> and suggests that 'the text as a whole gives no greater credence to this causal narrative than to any other'.<sup>48</sup> However, the surfeit of literature in the narrative goes some way to resolving this.

With the handbill of Tom Sheppard's execution and confession on the wall, we are presented with a scene in which Jack's father is, essentially, criminal literature. Ideas of criminal inheritance, expressed by physiognomy, are here transposed from a literal biological form into a symbolic literary form. Inheritance is conflated with reading, and the comforting certainty of criminal inheritance is transposed on to the far less containable implications of Jack's criminality coming from more insidious literary parentage. The fact that such pre-execution confessions were often fictionalised, as were Newgate novels, reveals the extent of the novel's generic self-reflexivity.<sup>49</sup>

Jack's literary qualities are further signalled by the gothic birthmarks which foreshadow his fate: 'a black mole under the child's right ear, shaped like a coffin, which is a bad sign; and a deep line just above the middle of the left thumb, meeting round about in the form of a noose' (5). Jack's body must be read as a text. Indeed,

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<sup>47</sup> Gillingham, p. 893.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 894.

<sup>49</sup> Hollingsworth, p. 4.



Carver notes this about Jonathan Wild, the novel's villain, with the thief-catcher's 'hieroglyphic scars' documenting his past adventures, 'as if his body itself is a gothic text'.<sup>50</sup> But while Wild's body documents his past, Jack's looks towards his future. With Jack as a surrogate text, his agency, or lack of, becomes a moot point: he is a representation of criminal literature, with a face that could 'almost make one in love with roguery', just as Newgate fiction was feared to do.

As with *Rookwood* the plot of *Jack Sheppard* revolves around a pack of 'papers', which here prove the noble parentage of Thames. Also, Wild is associated with literature and reading throughout the tale: his associate Blueskin maliciously throws Wood papers informing him of his wife's affair; he attempts to hide Thames's inheritance by controlling the relevant documents; he gives written instructions to his 'janizary' Quilt Arnold in the form of a 'pocket-book' (208); and, in the aftermath of the murder of Sir Rowland, Jack and Thames find 'a horrible spectacle – the floor deluged with blood – various articles of furniture upset – papers scattered about' (269). Throughout the novel Wild leaves a trail of reading material that is granted criminal capacity or has an association with crime. Literature and literacy are weapons to be used to his advantage. This is compounded by Wild's literary pedigree, which includes Henry Fielding's *Life of Mr Jonathan Wild the Great* (1743), and Daniel Defoe's *True and Genuine Account of the Life and Actions of the Late Jonathan Wild* (1725).

Wild's association with literature is most explicit in his response to Blueskin's pleading for Jack's life: 'it's useless to urge the matter further', insists Wild, 'Jack is registered in the Black Book' (192). With a lack of any further explanation forthcoming, one could assume that, as London's leading thief-taker, the 'Black

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<sup>50</sup> Carver, p. 213.

Book' is simply a list of those whom Wild has condemned to hang. Crucially, however, the nature of this Book is never elaborated on, despite the importance that its capitalisation suggests. It potentially appears again when Jack's mother, in Bedlam, tells her son of a dream she had where she saw him about to be hanged by Wild, who had 'a book in his hand, – but it couldn't be a prayer-book' (215). It could not be a prayer book because of its association with Wild, because of an assumed malevolence which invites the assumption that it could be the Newgate Calendar, or a Newgate novel.

Despite Gillingham's scepticism of Wild's claims that 'he has made Jack all that he is', Jack's ultimate corruption is depicted in a scene where Wild induces him to steal a 'pocket book' containing 'several letters and documents' from William Kneebone, in a Church (158).<sup>51</sup> This blasphemous theft marks the 'devilish triumphing' of Wild's criminal moulding of Jack (145): his eyes tell Jack's mother that 'your son has committed a robbery – here – in these holy walls – he is mine – mine for ever!' (145). Mrs Sheppard calls him 'Devil' for his intentions (164). Indeed, Carver has shown how Wild is consistently positioned as satanic throughout the novel.<sup>52</sup> This diabolic use of literature has wider significance, with the signing of one's name in the devil's book being an established witchcraft trope.<sup>53</sup> It is this traditional cultural association of the Devil and sinister books that Mrs Sheppard's dream and the Black Book gesture towards.

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<sup>51</sup> Gillingham, p. 894.

<sup>52</sup> Carver, p.205, footnote 73.

<sup>53</sup> For example, in Cotton Mather's *The Wonders of the Invisible World* (1692), and Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). Thomas Potts's *The Wonderfull Discoverie of Witches in the Countie of Lancaster* (1613) features numerous features stories of contractual deals with the Devil for possession of souls, sealed with blood, as well as a preoccupation with marks on the body as recording such deals, reminiscent of the attention paid to the bodily records of Sheppard and Wild.

Ainsworth would allude to this trope again in *The Lancashire Witches* (1848), in which Richard Assheton is almost tricked into the service of the demon Hobthrust, who requests that Richard signs his name, in blood, in his 'Book of Fate'.<sup>54</sup> Similarly, in *Rookwood*, the sinister Peter Bradley, with his singing of gothic songs, and predictions of death, is seen 'sitting with a great book open on his knees; it were a Bible I think [...] but when I knocked at the door, he hastily shut up the book, and ordered me to be gone [...] as if he were ashamed of being caught in the fact' (89). Bradley is immediately then suspected of gaining 'power from the Prince of Darkness', casting doubt on his book being the Bible at all (89). Wild's association with dubious texts is given a satanic context that exacerbates the novel's representation of literature as a tool of corruption. What is more, the evocation of the Devil's book emphasises not just the danger of reading, but also of the act of writing.

Wild's literary fashioning of Jack's criminal career has the effect of casting Wild as a knowingly exaggerated version of a Newgate author. For *Jack Sheppard*, writing and reading are dangerous tools, and it functions as an allegory of concerns over dangerous literature and its perceived production of criminal behaviour. Literature's power to create criminals is ostensibly endorsed, just as it is in Ainsworth's letter to *The Times*. Courvoisier, when professing his own corruption by literature, does not actively shape how the text functions, but highlights the already-present preoccupation. *Jack Sheppard* works to acknowledge, and stake its own claim for, its place in cultural modernity, and its role as literature of mass popularity with significant cultural influence.

#### IV. 'That old cove at the book-stall': *Oliver Twist*'s sympathies with *Jack Sheppard*

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<sup>54</sup>Ainsworth, *The Lancashire Witches: A Romance of Pendle Forest* (London; New York: G. Routledge, [1890], p. 446.

*Oliver Twist* became unavoidably associated with *Jack Sheppard*, both being serialised in *Bentley's Miscellany*, their runs overlapping, and both illustrated by Cruikshank. Dickens's novel was promptly caught up in the Newgate controversy which gathered around *Jack Sheppard*, and Dickens would subsequently distance himself from both Ainsworth's novel, and Ainsworth himself. However, *Oliver Twist* shares *Jack Sheppard's* cultural preoccupations. The Artful Dodger's sketching of the 'ground-plan of Newgate on the table with the piece of chalk' (192),<sup>56</sup> which John sees as a sign of popular culture's perceived swaying of boys towards a romantic conception of crime, finds parity with Jack Sheppard's carving of his own name into the beams of Wood's workshop. However, John suggests that

Oliver Twist is alone among the Newgate novels in analysing the role of the story-teller, entertainer or purveyor of fictions in the power dynamic of 1830s Britain [it offers] a sustained self-reflexive exploration of both Newgate fiction and the function of the entertainer in social structures of oppression [its commentary depends on] its self-referential, textual investigation of the ideological and moral complexity of the relationship between life and fiction.<sup>57</sup>

John's point is that, rather than being necessarily (or at least entirely) due to Oliver's inbuilt class-bound virtuousness, the ineffectiveness of Fagin's well-documented attempt to corrupt Oliver with a book of 'dreadful crimes' is a representation of the inferiority of the written word's ability to indoctrinate, compared to that of more accessible theatrical entertainments.<sup>58</sup> The 1839 Metropolitan Police Act is a testament to this concern, allowing the police to enter unlicensed theatres and to arrest those they found there.

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<sup>56</sup> Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 192. Further references to this edition will be given, in parenthesis, in the text.

<sup>57</sup> John, pp. 131-2.

<sup>58</sup> John, p. 135.

However, it is not a simple matter of whether writing or theatre is the more potent corrupting force. As Springhall has documented, a ‘continual two way ‘blood’ transfusion between [penny] gaff melodramas and penny serial fiction’ implicated both forms of popular entertainment in leading its consumers to crime.<sup>59</sup> The ostensibly benign Brownlow reveals the extent to which reading is compromised. When Bates and Dodger take Oliver pick-pocketing, it is not until they reach a bookstall that much of note happens. At the bookstall, however, there occurs the theft of Brownlow’s handkerchief, and the mass pursuit of Oliver. Upon spying Brownlow, Bates and Dodger elucidate his suitability as a target:

‘Hush!’ replied the Dodger. ‘Do you see that old cove at the book-stall?’

‘The old gentleman over the way?’ said Oliver. ‘Yes, I see him.’

‘He’ll do,’ said the Dodger.

‘A prime plant,’ observed Master Charley Bates” (73)

Brownlow’s position ‘at the book stall’ is key in marking him out as a potential victim. Not a criminal himself, his proximity to books makes him, and others, susceptible to crime. If Newgate has a tendency to depict a pathological literary culture, then Brownlow is the etiological centre of *Oliver Twist*.

Brownlow’s act of reading facilitates not only the criminal enterprises of Fagin’s boys, but also that of the public in the vicinity, as they pursue the wrongly accused Oliver. Importantly, ‘the mob’ (74) created by this lust for criminal pursuit is placed in competition with other popular entertainments, as ‘a whole audience desert Punch in the very thickest of the plot; and, joining the rushing throng, swell the shout: and lend fresh vigour to the cry’ (74). The aptness of the Punch and Judy puppet show

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<sup>59</sup> John Springhall, *Youth, Popular Culture and Moral Panics: Penny Gaffs to Gangsta Rap, 1830-1996* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), p. 9. ‘Penny gaffs’ were unlicensed theatres showing popular entertainments to ‘primarily wage-earning children and adolescents of both sexes’, see Springhall, p. 12.

is highlighted by Hollingsworth's contention that it functioned as prototype Newgate tale of murder and hanging.<sup>60</sup> Lured away from Mr Punch, the crowd instead are seduced by another tale of crime. This is theatrical corruption on a much more industrial scale, and, with this visual display of crime encouraging mimicry among school-boys and errand-boys, it is also the very thing depicted by 'The March of Knowledge'. However, it is the book stall that is the criminal catalyst.

Brownlow's ambiguous relationship with literature mirrors the mechanics of mass market literature in London, with James recording the numerous plagiarisms and unofficial continuations of Dickens's works, particularly *Sketches by 'Boz'*, and *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club*, which had an existence beyond Dickens's control.<sup>61</sup> This imaginative hijacking would inevitably lead to unofficial productions on the disreputable stage, where it would reach a lower class readership. Once again, Newgate's preoccupation with unmanageable narratives is one of its key features, and this slippery relationship between page and stage is reflected in *Oliver Twist*.

Brownlow's vulnerable reading goes on to facilitate Oliver's recapture by Bill Sikes, after sending him to return a 'parcel of books' (108) from the same bookseller. Importantly, this is realized with the aid of some impromptu street theatre, with Nancy, for the benefit of those watching, spinning a tale about Oliver as her younger brother who 'ran away, near a month ago, from his parents' (117). Once again the financial exchange of books leads to damaging, unregulated, criminal theatre and, ultimately, the perpetuation of criminal violence. Brownlow's books may be 'written to make the world wiser' (103), but his own reading practices, although they do not corrupt Oliver, facilitate a criminal agency in others.

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<sup>60</sup> Hollingsworth, p. 10.

<sup>61</sup> See James, pp. 45-71.

Despite John's view that *Oliver Twist* is 'alone among the Newgate novels' in dealing with these ideas, one must also view *Jack Sheppard*, and *Rookwood*, as functioning in this way. Fagin's role as, as Robert Tracy calls him, a 'generalized Newgate novelist', finds direct comparison with Wild.<sup>62</sup> John emphasises the role of 'amusement', or 'amusements', as being a signal term for the criminal conditions of *Oliver Twist*: the Dodger amuses himself drawing the plan of Newgate (192), and 'amusement, laughter and play are the ultimate ideological vehicles'.<sup>63</sup> In *Jack Sheppard*, the generation of 'amusement' as a democratic vehicle of communication is co-opted by Wild, and his supporting 'actors':

'Blueskin and the Minters were dragging Wood to the pump. The unfortunate carpenter struggled violently, but ineffectually. His hat was placed upon one pole, his wig on another. His shouts for help were answered by roars of mockery and laughter [...] The spectacle seemed to afford as much amusement to Jonathan as to the actors engaged in it. He could not contain his satisfaction, but chuckled, and rubbed his hands with delight.' (27)

With this unregulated criminal theatre and Punch-like puppet show, Wild, the figure of the Newgate author, is also a director and consumer of Newgate theatricals, recreating what Springhall calls the 'symbiotic relationship' between the page and the stage, and bringing all these popular, and problematic, forms of entertainment together.<sup>64</sup> It is a testament to the relevance of these concerns that the Lord Chamberlain would, after Russell's murder, place a ban on all new plays about Jack Sheppard. Once again, the literature both pre-empts and reflects the concern over its emulation, with Wild, and Brownlow, working to indict the act of reading.

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<sup>62</sup> John, p. 137. John cites Robert Tracy, "'The Old Story'" and Inside Stories: Modish Fiction and Fictional Modes in *Oliver Twist*', *Dickens Studies Annual*, 17 (1988), p. 20.

<sup>63</sup> John, p. 136.

<sup>64</sup> Springhall, p. 9.

## V. 'The universal theme of discourse': *Jack Sheppard*'s satire

In a letter to James Crossley, Ainsworth talks about what is required for popularity with the masses: 'the truth is, to write for the mob, you must not write too weak. The newspaper level is the true line to take'.<sup>65</sup> Taking advantage of an emerging market, and yet wary enough to refer to it as 'the mob', this ambivalent relationship is borne out by *Jack Sheppard*'s combining of literary corruption and public spectacle. *Jack Sheppard* depicts this problematic relationship, even as it is the novel that plays the largest role in its development.

The self-reflexivity of *Jack Sheppard* is such that Jack himself experiences the same anxiety over authorial control as a beleaguered Newgate author. Having made his third prison escape, fleeing from the authorities, he finds himself surrounded by a parasitic literary trade inadvertently created by him, but over which he has no control. From 'walls covered with placards offering a reward for his apprehension' (315) to someone scrawling 'JACK SHEPPARD'S CAGE' (316) on the place of his first escape, he is faced at every turn by his self-created literary persona. His own literary emanations have suffused the environment, replacing the criminal literature that influenced him.

Seeing a hawker selling penny histories of his exploits, Jack makes one last attempt to wrest control of his narrative, shouting out a protestation, which we are shown from the perspective of the salesman: "'That's false!" cried a voice behind him' (313).<sup>66</sup> Jack, at this point, is reduced to merely a voice, the narrative itself seemingly reluctant to identify him; when the crowd turn to see who has cried, 'they

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<sup>65</sup> Ainsworth, letter to Crossley, April 7 1838. Cited in Carver, p. 9 and p. 12.

<sup>66</sup> For the role of the hawker in J. B. Buckstone's stage adaptation of *Jack Sheppard* see Buckley, p. 458.



could not make out who had uttered it' (313). It as much as shows that the real Jack Sheppard no longer exists, merely the sensational image of him engendered in the imagination of the readership and the literature they consume. It evokes a similar scene in William Godwin's *Things as They Are; or, the Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1794), in which Caleb is alarmed to find broadsides being sold which recount his 'Most Wonderful and Surprising History and Miraculous Adventures'.<sup>67</sup> Caleb is compelled to purchase a copy, to read about his own exploits. The radical Godwinian politics inherent in this allusion highlight Newgate's position amongst the radical press of the 1830s.

Heather Worthington sees Godwin's scene as drawing attention to 'the proliferation and profitability of such narratives'.<sup>68</sup> *Jack Sheppard*, too, highlights the problematic proliferation of literature. Newlyn links Romantic ideas of 'loss of self-identity consequent on industrial expansion and the overcrowding of England's great cities' with Charles Rzepka's description of Romantic 'mass urbanization'.<sup>69</sup> Rzepka notes that

it became increasingly difficult for the self to find a recognizable place in English society, harder to tell if what others saw was the true self, or if the self was being compromised, made false, taken away from its owner by more fluid and less dependable categories of public identification.<sup>70</sup>

It is here that we see the significance of the *Athenaeum*'s view that the popularity of such novels as *Jack Sheppard* is a result of environmental pressures like 'the

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<sup>67</sup> William Godwin, *Caleb Williams* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p.258.

<sup>68</sup> Heather Worthington, 'The Newgate Novel', in *The Oxford History of the Novel in English: The Nineteenth Century Novel 1820-1880*, ed. by John Kucich and Jenny Bourne Taylor, 12 vols (Oxford Scholarship Online, 2011), III, p. 3. Ebook.

<sup>69</sup> Newlyn, p. 44.

<sup>70</sup> Charles Rzepka, *The Self as Mind: Vision and Identity in Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Keats* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1986), p. 23. Cited by Newlyn, p. 44.

aggregation of the population into large towns'.<sup>71</sup> Ainsworth's depictions of the environmental crowding of criminal literature, together with the mass incited to violence by a lust for crime, suggest that, rather than being uniquely Romantic, these ideas would go on to be more fully expressed in the early Victorian period.

*Rookwood* also shows signs of this anxiety of control. Carver sees Dick Turpin as adopting roles, disguising himself, 'or at least the self wearing the mask of the highwayman'.<sup>72</sup> Yet, what is characteristic of the criminals in this tale is not that they hide their identity, but that they seek to effect full control over its public reception by way of popular song. As well as 'One foot in the Stirrup', Turpin also sings of himself in 'A Chapter of Highwaymen', while 'Jerry Juniper's Chant' sees the titular thief sing his life story. According to James, *Rookwood* was published 'before plagiarisms got underway'.<sup>73</sup> However, it still seems anxious about the necessity to retain control over one's own narrative. Whereas Turpin maintains this control, Jack has it wrested from him by the potentially radicalised mass.

The irony of this would be the number of versions of Sheppard's life that Ainsworth's novel would prompt, both in print and in the theatre, with Ainsworth himself publically supporting some unlicensed productions. However, just as Carver notes that the 'problematic' effect of *Jack Sheppard* was its movement from bourgeois novel to staple of the working class theatre, a similar shift is reflected in Jack's lack of control over his own story.<sup>74</sup>

At this point *Jack Sheppard's* participation in a discourse of its own literary contrivance turns its attention to the consumers of Newgate. The novel works to

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<sup>71</sup>[Anon.], *Athenaum*, 26 October 1839, p. 804.

<sup>72</sup> Carver, p.152.

<sup>73</sup> James, p.157.

<sup>74</sup> Carver, p.180.

fashion the image of a malleable Newgate public unable to see the real figure of Jack, so consumed are they with unrealistic romance:

‘Let me have one,’ cried a servant maid, running across the street, and in her haste forgetting to shut the door,—‘here’s the money. Master and missis have been talking all day long about Jack Sheppard, and I’m dying to read his life.’

‘Here you have it, my dear,’ returned the hawker. ‘Sold again!’

‘If you don’t get back quickly, Lucy,’ observed a bystander, ‘Jack Sheppard will be in the house before you.’

This sally occasioned a general laugh.

‘If Jack would come to my house, I’d contrive to hide him,’ remarked a buxom dame. ‘Poor fellow! I’m glad he has escaped.’ (313)

Sheppard, a ‘smirking grocer’s apprentice’ notes, ‘seems to be a great favourite with the fair sex’(313), which, along with the dame’s sexualisation, calls to mind the eighteenth-century concerns about vulnerable female readers. However, this lust for Newgate literature has a wider impact. Not only is the front door left open, exposing the vulnerability of the ‘master and missis’ to the reading practices of others, but the potential of moral corruption is evident in the sympathy of the dame for someone who, as the hawker has just stressed, is accused of a ‘barbarous murder’ (313). In this critique of its own audience, the novel both legitimises and mocks the cultural panic surrounding it.

Ellis, defending *Jack Sheppard*, argues that although Ainsworth ‘threw a romantic glamour over his merry sinners’ the tale was ultimately a moral one as ‘the shadow of the hangman is ever dogging their heels, and retribution overtakes them at

the last'.<sup>75</sup> However, at the close of the tale Jack is granted an almost royal status as crowds follow his 'procession' (340) to the gallows. By the time he extends his hands towards Mr Wood, who cries 'God bless you' (343), Jack seems to have been transformed into some sort of saint. This is exacerbated by the reference to the gallows as 'the fatal tree' (343), which, as well as evoking the tree of knowledge, simultaneously functions as a reference to the practice of referring to Christ's cross as a 'tree'.<sup>76</sup> Indeed, the *Penny Satirist* would compound this, describing Buckstone's Sheppard as absorbing 'the entire attention of the crowded audience, as much as if a saint was being burnt'.<sup>77</sup> Carver notes this association in *Rookwood*, in which Turpin's flash song 'A Chapter of Highwaymen' punningly mentions Jack Sheppard's 'flock', with all its biblical connotations.<sup>78</sup> Carver refers to William Empson, when noting that this maintains a precedent set by John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, where MacHeath, Turpin's 'literary antecedent', sings of suffering, Christ like, on a tree.<sup>79</sup> This canonisation of criminality suggests the possibility that the true function of this exaggerated glorification of low criminals is to target not Jack Sheppard, but the audience who idolise him.

Captured for the final time Jack is taken to Westminster Hall and official sentencing of execution is given by the Attorney General; but the real action is occurring outside:

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<sup>75</sup> Ellis, p. 373.

<sup>76</sup> David Lyle Jeffrey, ed., *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W. B. Eerdmans, 1992), p. 779; p. 780. Indeed, the gallows at Tyburn, where Jack Sheppard was hanged, was nicknamed the 'triple tree', as it was a wooden structure supported by three legs, designed to hang several people simultaneously. This piece of slang is used in both *Jack Sheppard* and *Rookwood*. With Jesus himself crucified alongside two other men, the communal execution of Tyburn works to strengthen the Christian analogy.

<sup>77</sup> [Anon.], 'Jack Sheppard, Now Performing at the Adelphi Theatre, London', *Penny Satirist*, 09 November 1839.

<sup>78</sup> Carver, p.167.

<sup>79</sup> William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (London: Penguin, 1966), p. 185. Cited by Carver, p. 164.

By this time, Jack's reputation had risen to such a height with the populace,—his exploits having become the universal theme of discourse, that the streets were almost impassable for the crowds collected to obtain a view of him. [...] when such was the rush of the multitude that several persons were trampled down, and received severe injuries. (330)

The crowd's desire to view Jack sees their criminality and violence increase, and their numbers multiplying:

the mob outside had prodigiously increased, and had begun to exhibit some disposition to riot. The coach in which the prisoner had been conveyed was already broken to pieces, and the driver was glad to escape with life. Terrific shouts were raised by the rabble, who threatened to tear Wild in pieces if he showed himself.

Amid this tumult, several men armed with tremendous bludgeons, with their faces besmeared with grease and soot, and otherwise disguised, were observed to be urging the populace to attempt a rescue. (331)

The general populace is compelled to violence by a criminal minority under the sway of Jack Sheppard, or rather the commercial image of his exploits. As 'the universal theme of discourse' Jack is now a written and theatrical narrative which exerts control over its consumers, now described as a 'mob' just like those who chased Oliver Twist, and just how Ainsworth described his own audience. Thronging as they are to 'obtain a view' of Jack we are again presented with a facsimile theatre so compelling that customers are driven to destruction and violence. In the context of the increase of radical and rebellious publications in the 1830s, the effect that Jack's tales have on its readers is particularly loaded.

As Joyce notes, this engages with ongoing anxieties about public violence, and particularly Chartism.<sup>80</sup> That *Jack Sheppard* needs to be placed in this context is borne out by the views of Mary Russell Mitford, as cited by Ellis:

I have been reading *Jack Sheppard*, and have been struck by the great danger, in these times, of representing authorities so constantly and fearfully in the wrong; [...] all the Chartists in the land are less dangerous than this nightmare of a book.<sup>81</sup>

With the Newport Rising occurring during its serialisation, Ainsworth's images of crowd violence emerge from a period where fears of public unrest, for Joyce, 'came to permeate English political and cultural discourse'.<sup>82</sup> The threat of the Chartist movement itself was exacerbated by the early 1830s context of the popular discontent preceding the First Reform Act of 1832, the Swing Riots of 1830, as well as the July Revolution in Paris. *Jack Sheppard* articulates the modernity of this crucial period of change, with the culturally potent image of the rioting crowd. The surfacing of the face-besmeared men, and an 'athletic-looking, swarthy-featured man, who was armed with a cutlass' (331), enact the emergence of criminal types from the anonymous mass. It is as if the lust for criminal entertainment prompts a physical transformation, such is the incongruous presence of these outlandish figures.

Criminals are, in effect, being created from raw material, a grotesque simulacrum of Siskin's cultural mass production that defines his 'modern [...] world of print'. This mob violence also engages with the sort of early nineteenth-century concerns about the effect of public hangings that V. A. C. Gatrell has noted: concerns of the unmanageability of the crowd, the enjoyment of the gruesome spectacle, and

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<sup>80</sup> Joyce, p. 70.

<sup>81</sup> Ellis, I, p. 376

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

potential anti-establishment sympathies aroused by the condemned.<sup>83</sup> With Wild as the author of Jack's criminality, as well as responsible for sending men to the gallows, the public danger represented by Newgate texts is aligned with contemporary fears of the crowd. Newgate novel, penny gaff, and gallows all add up to one continuous criminal spectacle which produces violence.

The mob loot Wild's house in an attack on the symbolic Newgate author, while they also attack the edifice of Newgate prison itself. It is an ironic cautionary tale for Ainsworth. But these consumers of Jack Sheppard's exploits inhabit a self-contradicting dual role, at once wanting to save him and simultaneously enjoying the spectacle of his death. The 'festive character' the procession assumes cements this inconsistency (341), and the 'thousand eager assistants' (343) only leap to recover Jack's body after he is hanged: his death is the satisfying conclusion of a criminal narrative which the 'spectators' desire (343). As in *Oliver Twist*, visual spectacle and literary sensation combine to create mass panic and a craving for criminality. *Jack Sheppard* portrays consumers of entertainment as a malleable mob, an easily influenced group of contradictory motivations, absurd moments, and bizarre characters.

Working alongside this is the disparity between the antiquated folkloric devilry which the novel evokes and the modernity of its pervasive mass literature. After all, as *Fraser's* concern that Bulwer Lytton's Newgate novel *Eugene Aram* (1832) was 'a modern, a depraved, a corrupting taste' suggests,<sup>84</sup> it is the modernity of the Newgate texts that makes them so subversive. However, with the romantic representation of the Newgate author so implicated in archaic superstition (by the

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<sup>83</sup> V. A. C. Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree: Execution and the English People 1770-1868* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 29-99.

<sup>84</sup> [Anon.], 'A Good Tale Badly Told', *Fraser's Magazine*, February 1832, 107-113 (p. 112).

Black Book), the effect is the portrayal of a knowingly hyperbolic fear of literature. This violent exaggeration of the Newgate panic implicates critics, as well as readers, in a foolish fear of, and gruesome lust for, tales of the gibbet that even *Jack Sheppard* itself does not always take completely seriously, simultaneously evoking and poking fun at it.

The idea of literature as site of criminal production is conveyed by *Jack Sheppard*'s account of the prison from which Newgate novels takes their name:

it has been asserted that a youth once confined in Newgate, is certain to come out a confirmed thief [...] and if he does not come out qualified to take any degree of villainy, he must be the most honest dunce that ever had the advantage of such eminent tutors. (222-3)

This sentiment gestures towards Bulwer Lytton, whose *Paul Clifford* indicted the inadequacies of the legal system in the creation of criminals.<sup>85</sup> However, such is *Jack Sheppard*'s focus on literary influence that the passage simultaneously functions as a sly warning that all who indulge in Newgate fiction are at risk. As at the close of the novel, where mobs incited by the tales of Jack read in penny histories rise up and oppose the authorities, *Jack Sheppard* exudes a self-awareness of the perceived power to influence its readers that its critics accused it of. While Courvoisier altered the role which certain novels had in the critical and public consciousness, arguably the most enthusiastic advocates of this fear were the novels themselves.

Together, *Rookwood*, *Oliver Twist* and *Jack Sheppard*, represent Newgate as a genre overtly preoccupied with its own literary status and its place in an emergent and expanding market. While *Rookwood* acknowledges its

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<sup>85</sup> See Hollingsworth, pp. 66-82; see also the preface to the 1840 edition of *Paul Clifford*.



position, *Jack Sheppard* uses these same themes to critique both the critics and the audience. *Jack Sheppard* is both a subversive portrayal of criminal literature, and a satirical attack on the mass consumption of popular entertainment.

Ainsworth's Newgate plots depict a world where their attractive criminals are dependent on the uncontrollability of literature, and yet vulnerable to it.

Springhall argues that the penny gaffs 'signified an autonomous working-class youth subculture over which [middle-class moralists and reformers] exerted only a sporadic control'.<sup>86</sup> While Ainsworth's Newgate literature acknowledges the role of the theatre, it self-incriminatingly brings the focus back to the novels themselves. It exploits and expresses unease about the unruly uncontrollability of popular media, and the extent to which popular entertainment narratives were appropriated and re-written by consumers. It is the affirmation of, and battle with, a society saturated by literature, the lust for it and the distrust of it, and in *Jack Sheppard*, we are presented with a criminal figure that is 'the universal theme of discourse', a symbol of the consumption of literature that cannot be policed.

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<sup>86</sup> Springhall, p. 35.