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Popular Fictions of Gender in the Newgate Novels

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<1>The Newgate Novel was a popular genre during the 1830s and 1840s. It gained its name from hostile critics who believed the authors' focus on criminals would corrupt impressionable contemporary readers, especially the young. Among the criminals who are portrayed in the Newgate novels, female criminals are under-represented compared to women's prosecutions for actual crimes during the period. Keith Hollingsworth's *The Newgate Novel, 1830-1847* (1963) remains the most comprehensive available survey of the genre, yet omits the important role played by female characters, especially the ways in which they ground the novels in nineteenth-century cultural ideals of femininity. Many Newgate novels do not represent female criminals at all, but their omission in itself is significant, and highlights the way that the novels are informed by and reflect the gender ideology of their authors' contemporary society for which "proper" femininity was especially associated with innocent passivity. The surprising lack of female criminals in Newgate novels is most notable at the beginning of the 1830s, and this absence is linked to the ascendancy of a bourgeois domestic ideal for women. Over the course of the decade the authors of the Newgate novels begin to relinquish their focus on idealized women and begin to include more abject female characters. Where women, and particularly female criminals, are represented in these novels, they remain bound to middle-class conventions of femininity, which are unsettled by the agency and energy of the criminal female who is independent, transgressive and active in a world where morally upstanding women are expected to be obedient, subservient and passive. Essentially, there is a change in the degree of emphasis on the idealized female and the criminal woman.

<2>The gender ideology of the Newgate novelists' contemporary society was wrapped up in a domestic ideal. Martha Vicinus describes how the idealized middle-class Victorian woman "combined total sexual innocence...and the worship of the family hearth" (ix), which constitutes the "Angel in the House" paradigm. Although the phrase was not coined until around 1854, with the release of Coventry Patmore's poem of that title, the ideal that it refers to was well established by the 1830s. The middle-class norms and values of femininity were focused on the

idea of the woman as passive, virtuous and respectable. The image of the morally pure woman as the ideal of femininity during this period was all-pervasive, and consequentially the gentle, innocent, and modest woman infiltrates the Newgate novels, drawing their female characters away from the sort of agency that might be embodied in a criminal woman. In this article, I will focus on Edward Bulwer-Lytton's *Eugene Aram* (1832) and William Harrison Ainsworth's *Rookwood* (1834) and *Jack Sheppard* (1839).⁽¹⁾ Using novels from various points in the 1830s, I will explore the way in which, over the course of the decade, the Newgate authors, with new confidence, begin to yield some of their focus on the stereotypical female ideal and embrace the abject female criminal.

Historical Context

<3>Earlier in the century there had been a change in the way female criminals were viewed by English society. Opinions on their treatment became broadly more sympathetic. The responses to the execution of Sarah Lloyd, a servant, in 1800, and of Eliza Fenning, a servant, in 1815, highlighted growing public disgust at the way female criminals were treated. Sarah Lloyd was convicted of capital larceny to the value of forty shillings and condemned to death. Lloyd's epitaph tells us that her female weaknesses were the reason for her demise, after "admitting her abandon'd seducer, into the Dwelling House of her Mistress" (Wright 42). Eliza Fenning was convicted of attempting to murder her master's household by poisoning their dumplings with arsenic. *The Examiner* summed up the sympathetic public opinion:

Some persons have all along doubted her guilt, and, as far as we have seen the reports of the trial, it certainly appears by no means clear to us, that she really put the arsenic in the dumplings. When the verdict was given, we expressed our doubts, and for this simple expression of them, (for we know nothing whatever of her) the poor creature has forwarded her thanks to the Office... (Recorder's Report – Eliza Fenning 479)

The language, such as "poor creature," seeks to invite sympathy for the woman whom *The Examiner* sees as the victim in this case. Both Cathy Callahan and Vic Gatrell believe that, in particular, middle- and upper-class "society did not feel threatened by female transgression..." (Callahan 1015, see also Gatrell 336), and the radical agenda of *The Examiner* and its reformist readers would have been sympathetic to many of the transgressions of poor women.

<4>As the "Angel in the House," women were considered by contemporary society to be of weaker dispositions and more morally vulnerable than men.⁽²⁾ Contemporary medical journals point to women's reproductive system as a reason for their vulnerability.⁽³⁾ And yet of course, contradictory to their weakness, they were also expected to uphold the moral strength in the home, which will be considered later. However, one reason that Lloyd and Fenning felt the fullest force of the law was that they "violated strongly held ideas about how women employed in various positions should behave" (Callahan 1028). Lloyd and Fenning, as servants, were perceived to have challenged the hierarchical social structure by committing crimes against their masters. Even though servants were not attached to husbands or partners, they were still expected to behave obediently towards those who supervised them. Transgressions of this

hierarchical relationship contributed to an increase in the numbers of women punished for committing crimes during the 1830s. By this time, while a woman transgressing her passive role as a servant risked punishment by the law, sympathy for female criminals was widespread. In *The Early Feminists* (1995), Kathryn Gleadle describes how feminist ideas and debates were circulating well before 1850 with the emergence of the radical Unitarian movement in the 1830s.⁽⁴⁾ Historians including Barbara Caine have emphasized the significance of these beginnings of a women's movement for feminism, highlighting its long and complex history.⁽⁵⁾ Already, by the 1830s, activism had led to improvements for women in various aspects of English society, including their treatment in prisons,⁽⁶⁾ but early women's rights campaigners "pointed to the inconsistency that the head of the realm might be female, and yet women were not permitted even to choose members of parliament...[and] railed against the injustice that propertied women were forced to pay taxes, but had no political representation" (Gleadle 72). Women's desire for agency in politics is reflected in the novels' representations of their agency in everyday life as the following readings will show. The more frequent depiction of criminal women in the Newgate novels, such as *Jack Sheppard*, subtly acknowledges these wider social developments and suggests an increasing awareness of gender inequality.

<5>Cases such as those of Lloyd and Fenning allowed writers to explore the possibility that women could be criminal, feminine, and sympathetic at the same time. Criminal women gradually emerged in the popular Newgate novels, but they are never as deviant as the criminal men, and the authors evaluate them in connection to conventional conceptions of femininity and retain many feminine attributes. Female criminal characters do not emerge fully until a second wave of Newgate novels appeared towards the end of the decade, notably *Jack Sheppard* by Ainsworth and *Oliver Twist* by Dickens, both published in 1839. In these texts, the authors, with new confidence, yield some of their focus on the stereotypical female ideal and embrace the abject female criminal. Despite giving more emphasis to female criminals, the authors still maintain their reader's sympathy with deviant women, which is now directed towards the more visible lower-class figures and their struggles in the novels.

The Idealized Women of *Eugene Aram*

<6>In Edward Bulwer's Newgate novel *Eugene Aram* (1832) there are no female criminals, which is also true of his *Paul Clifford* (1830), the first Newgate novel.⁽⁷⁾ The main protagonist, Eugene Aram is in flight from a crime he was involved with in his youth, and is an intellectual man with many seemingly redeeming qualities. In the novel, the two main female characters are the daughters of Rowland Lester, a wealthy gentleman. The paradox of one sister's typically feminine and the other sister's more masculine characteristics signal the beginning of the inclusion of the change in the degree of emphasis on the "Angel in the House" in popular fiction before the publication of Patmore's poem. Eugene Aram, the criminal, falls in love with Madeline, the elder of the two daughters. She is described as "the beauty and the boast of the whole country," (7) which makes her fall at the end of the novel even greater. Madeline embodies the contemporary feminine ideal. Her excessive reading of romances, according to the narrator has "softened her mind" (7). In Madeline's eyes, Aram's attraction may lie in his similarity to the characters of the novels she reads, making her more susceptible to Aram's

charms when compared with her sister. Throughout the novel, Ellinor, Madeline's younger sister, sees through Aram's intellectual charms and she argues with Madeline on the subject. Ellinor's observant understanding highlights the weakness of Madeline's mind, and her tendency to view people generously and naïvely. By the end of the novel, Madeline's feminine weakness is explicitly described when she becomes inconsolable about Aram's fate:

Her colour, naturally delicate as the hues of the pink shell or the youngest rose, faded into one marble whiteness, which again, as time proceeded, flushed into that red and preternatural hectic...Her form shrank from its rounded and noble proportions. Deep hollows traced themselves beneath eyes which yet grew even more lovely as they grew less serenely bright. (303)

In turning white and blushing red, being associated with shells and flowers, and with her eyes becoming "more lovely," Madeline's physical reaction to Aram's plight firmly situates her within feminine norms. Even Madeline's death, after hearing Aram's guilty verdict, reveals her total reliance on this man: "[s]he looked on the golden sun and gentle earth, and the little motes dancing in the western ray—all was steeped in quiet, and full of...peace and tranquility..." as she "uttered a faint cry of pain, and fell at once to the ground" (324). Madeline's final moments, described in such feminine terms, contain her in conventional femininity.

<7>Madeline's sister, Ellinor, is much more understated in the text because she "looked up to her sister as a superior being," (7) but, like her sister, she remains firmly within the boundaries of femininity. When Ellinor is introduced, "[t]he sunlight of a happy and innocent heart sparkled on her face, and gave a beam it gladdened you to behold" (7). Yet Ellinor possesses greater common sense than Madeline, and is less easily led; Ellinor is more cautious towards Aram and questions his secretive nature in contrast to her sister's frail femininity. Ellinor's stronger mind leads her to a much happier conclusion than her sister, as she is eventually married to her cousin Walter. The contrasting images of the weak and the strong woman align with early women's rights campaigners' "attempts to urge people to reconsider their conventional notions of womanly abilities and interests" (Gleadle 72). Here the weaker, traditional woman, Madeline, loses her life and with it her ability to raise a family and look after her husband, while the slightly stronger, more independent female, Ellinor, is able to successfully fulfill her role. The paradox of the stronger woman being able to fulfill the role of the contemporary conventional female highlights the beginning of the inclusion of the digressive woman and her strength in the popular fiction of the period. In creating this paradox there is a moderate feminist point being raised, suggesting that the weak "Angel in the House" paradigm is insufficient, and that an intelligent woman is a credit to the household, which cuts across the passive angel and active criminal division.

Ainsworth's Progressive Movement in *Rookwood*

<8>Bulwer's novel shows some signs of potential progress for women in line with evolving ideas surrounding women's rights, and yet his female characters are all still embedded in contemporary conventions of femininity. William Harrison Ainsworth's *Rookwood* (1834) is one

of the first Newgate novels to bring female criminals and their capabilities to the attention of a popular reading public. The deceit and criminality of women is often disguised by the supernatural, and such deviations therefore escape serious consideration. There is a larger body of female characters in *Rookwood* who play a relatively significant role in the narrative compared to other Newgate novels, including *Eugene Aram*, and challenge expectations of passive femininity.

<9>Eleanor Mowbray is set up as the model of perfect womanhood. She has “singular beauty” and “inexpressible charm” (77). As a weak and beautiful woman, Eleanor is a passive victim of the actions of those around her, whether male or female. Eleanor’s femininity becomes a standard against which other female characters can be measured. Many characters, including her own mother, act against her for their own gain and her passive nature allows this to take place. Her weakness is exemplified during the attempt to force her marriage to Luke Rookwood: “[t]he victim resisted not” (245). Doing as she is bid, Eleanor acts her role perfectly as the “Angel in the House.” Lady Maud Rookwood has great power, which Eleanor does not wish for after her marriage. She has no desire to push against the expectations set out for her and she pleads with her betrothed to allow his mother to maintain her power in the household. To her mother she states: “To Lady Rookwood, as to yourself, I would be a daughter, as far as is consistent with my duty...but my first consideration shall be my husband” (382). The loyalty to her husband and respect for patriarchy allows Eleanor to arrive at the end of the novel happily married to Ranulph Rookwood, while most of the other women have died or become destitute. The plot leads the reader to a clear moral judgment of the women based on Eleanor as the perfect example of femininity. Eleanor’s upper-class background and her passive acceptance of what is expected of her make her the most stereotypically feminine character in the novel, and leaves her alone amongst a group of much more deviant female characters that had been so far unseen in Newgate novels.

<10>Lady Maud Rookwood is the widow of Sir Reginald Rookwood and, as a member of the aristocracy, is the most notable upper-class female character in the novel. Cynthia Curran has analyzed the fortunes of the middle-class Victorian widow, noting how, even for relatively respectable widows, self-sufficiency was almost impossible; it was “likely that many widows became the recipients of private charity” (235-36). Although an aristocratic and supposedly respectable character, Lady Rookwood tends towards criminality through her threatening manner. On being asked to provide stability and funds for her husband’s son, Luke, she simply states “I will provide—a grave” (88). However, she never actually commits crimes herself. Lady Rookwood, then, can command her acquaintances to do as she bids and break the law, while her aristocratic social position and distance from the crimes maintain her respectability and moral standing in polite society.

<11>The author’s initial description of Lady Rookwood notes her feminine beauty, but also a pride and mental strength more characteristic of male norms, such as her “severe” face, the appearance of which, in women, was often associated with criminality (87).⁽⁸⁾ The reader also learns that Lady Rookwood had immense psychological power over her husband during his life, inverting the normal balance between the sexes. Her son states to his friends: “You know the

restraint she...had over my father, and how she maintained it" (81). It is not until her husband lies on his deathbed that Lady Rookwood relinquishes her hold over him. Throughout the novel, Lady Rookwood hides the identity of her husband's eldest son, who is born of another woman, to protect her own son's inheritance. The love of her children was one of only three things (the other two being religion and memory) with which the widow of the period could console herself and give her life purpose (Jalland 242). This protection could be viewed as a natural maternal instinct, yet there is a sinister and selfish hue to her thoughts that cannot be ignored. By the end of the novel, the power that Lady Rookwood believes she holds and her desire to protect her child drive her to madness. Once she has heard of her son's impending marriage and her subsequent loss of status as the Lady of the House, her doctor and her son describe her as "[e]nraged," "ungovernable," and "outrageous," being "only excusable on the ground of insanity" (383). It is this madness that drives Lady Rookwood to her death. During her ravings she attempts to grasp a sword and she becomes trapped inside a sarcophagus. The conclusion extends little sympathy for Lady Rookwood even in her death, which seems a punishment for her scheming and plotting throughout the novel. Despite her attempts to gain power and control the destinies of family members as well as other characters, her maternal love for her son is her undoing, and so she dies as a result of a supposedly female susceptibility to madness. The sarcophagus can be seen as the symbolic embodiment of the restrictions of contemporary femininity; no matter how hard she tries and no matter what acts she commits, Lady Rookwood cannot escape the imprisoning expectations of her gender. Ainsworth may also feel restricted by the gender norms imposed by contemporary society and cannot at this point fully explore the deviant female character.

<12>Among the lower-class and gypsy characters in the novel, the most deviant is Barbara Lovel. The initial description of Barbara differs considerably from those of the more feminine characters. The people whom Barbara leads "acknowledged her power, unhesitatingly obeyed her commands, and shrank with terror from her anathema" (186). She is, however, described as having a "maternal hand" that indicates a natural femininity (186). Barbara is the antithesis of her beautiful granddaughter, Sybil, as she is introduced in disturbing gothic terms: "So dead, so bloodless, so blackened seemed the flesh, where flesh remained, leather could scarce be tougher than her skin" (188). Not only does she appear like "an animated mummy" but her eyes were "sinister and sunken" (188). The unflattering description of Barbara foreshadows her vengeful malevolence throughout the novel and Barbara goes out of her way to ensure others are miserable. The novel encourages little sympathy for the gypsy queen, even when her actions are motivated by love for her children or grandchildren. In many ways, both Barbara and Lady Rookwood have similarly unfeminine characteristics, including their love of and need for power; even their love for their children provides a shared characteristic. These differences highlight that the main distinction between the two women is their social class. While Bulwer in *Eugene Aram* only alludes to a lower-class character (Dame Darkmans), Ainsworth openly includes them in *Rookwood*, which signifies a move away from conventions. Not only does this mark a change in the inclusion of women in the Newgate novels, but it also allows for differentiation amongst the female characters. By including more lower-class female characters, Ainsworth makes it possible for his narrative to explore deviance in more detail. The upper-class character's deviance may have been shocking to contemporary readers but,

deviance in a lower-class character would not only have been more accepted, it may also have been expected.

<13>Barbara's death is her final move away from conventional femininity. On meeting Dick Turpin, who has stumbled across her weak and feeble person, Barbara is asked: "You will not lay violent hands upon yourself, mother?" (343). Although Barbara replies in the negative and insists that "I will let Nature do her task," (343) she refuses to eat and drink, and therefore commits suicide by omission. The "good death" ideal, as highlighted by Patricia Jalland in *Death in the Victorian Family* (1996), is one that focused on the state of the individual's soul at the moment of death, and how much preparation had been made for the passing (17). Suicide was the antithesis of the "good death" and was viewed as an offence against God. Yet there is ambiguity in Barbara's statement: suicide may be a way for her to assert agency, and yet by allowing Nature to "do her task," she remains passive. Her suicide places her in an ambiguous position in terms of her femininity (the topic of suicide will be returned to later). Posthumously, she is able to fulfill her revenge vicariously, by murdering Luke Rookwood via Dick Turpin's delivery of a package filled with poison. Barbara's violence is displaced, much as Lady Rookwood's criminality is. Although Barbara's love for her granddaughter is rooted in the expected behaviors of women, her actions to preserve that love lead her into a criminal obsession, blurring usually distinct ideas of femininity and criminality.

<14>Ainsworth has yet another female character who, unlike Barbara, initially seems to fit the stereotypical female norm, but who proves herself to be deviant. Barbara's granddaughter, Sybil, is more aligned to Eleanor Mowbray than any other character in the novel. Whereas Eleanor exemplifies the norms of femininity, Sybil transgresses these in committing suicide like her grandmother. The narrator's initial description of Sybil is superbly feminine: her "features were exquisite," she had "dark yet radiant features," (171) and she is later described as a "fair maiden" (183). Unfortunately for Sybil, her social class works against her, is looked down upon by many of the other characters, negatively impacts upon her happiness, and leads her towards criminality. Ainsworth seems to suggest that being of a lower class tends towards an inescapable deviance of character, and yet the author also feels sympathetic towards the plight of the lower classes and imbues these characters with at least some redeeming features. Sybil is a religious woman, and an entire chapter is devoted to her pleas to heaven for forgiveness for the suicide she will commit. Despite these efforts to cleanse her soul, contemporary readers would have been unlikely to accept Sybil's confession in place of a priest's last rites, although the attempt does mitigate her actions. Mainly from love and selfish need, she ignores the will of her grandmother and ensures she is married to Luke. While, in terms of this plot development, Sybil has a feminine role in reinforcing the patriarchal line by ensuring her beloved's title lands remain in his possession, her suicide ultimately rejects feminine passivity by allowing her to determine her own fate.

<15>*Rookwood's* general representation of women suggests that women may outwardly adhere to feminine norms but actually subtly deviate from them, and are more than they appear. Throughout the novel, Dick Turpin's mantra is "never trust a petticoat," (168) and the actions of some of the women prove these to be wise words, particularly Lady Rookwood and

Barbara Lovell. A petticoat hides a woman's sexual power, and their outwardly respectable femininity can hide deep malevolence. Another example of the truth of Turpin's mantra comes through his discussion with his friend, Tom King. King disagrees with Turpin's views and argues that "woman is faithful, loving and self sacrificing," asserting that it is men who make them otherwise (303-4). Turpin, on the other hand, believes women are a "deceitful sex, indeed" (303). Another friend, Jerry, replies "'Tis a vile sex'" (303). Not long after their conversation, Tom King is arrested after his woman turns against him, which allows the reader to understand why Turpin repeatedly rejects women: "curse me if ever I pin my life on a petticoat" (304). Turpin's views reflect the threat posed by the power and agency of the women in the novel over the robber's life. The pin image has uncomfortable suggestions of death by hanging as the prisoner would stand on a platform released by a moving lever or 'pin' causing them to drop. Ainsworth's inclusion of both lower-class and deviant female characters heralds a reduced focus on the conventionally perfect female character, gentle and sexually innocent. Instead, the Newgate genre begins to give more emphasis to deviant and abject female characters, including female criminals. The ultimate inclusion of such characters occurs in Ainsworth's most successful Newgate novel, *Jack Sheppard* (1839).

The Emergence of the Female Criminal in *Jack Sheppard*

<16>Ainsworth's *Jack Sheppard* features many female characters, one of whom the reader is initially led to believe fits the "Angel in the House" paradigm. Mrs Wood is first introduced tending to Thames Darrell's wounded wrist. Although not middle-class, Mrs Wood aspires to all of the middle-class norms and values of femininity. Her desire to exude a higher social status makes her even more concerned with social norms than those who can comfortably say they are middle-class. Mrs Wood directs her energies towards her home and husband. Mr Wood's chivalry towards the impoverished Mrs Sheppard—in taking in her son, allowing her to visit his home, and extending sympathy towards her—incites anger in Mrs Wood, and yet despite her continual admonitions she maintains her husband's loyalty and protects his home.

<17>However, these initial impressions of Mrs Wood are undermined when her cuckolding and shrewish nature become evident. Performing the role of "Angel in the House" without the substance, Mrs Wood berates her husband for placing Winifred (her daughter) and Thames Darrell in danger by taking Jack Sheppard on as an apprentice: "I knew how it would be...when you brought that worthless hussy's worthless brat into the house. I told you no good would come of it. And every day's experience proves that I was right" (130). Mrs Wood chastises Mr Wood's care over Jack and his destitute mother. She believes that leaving her husband to make decisions on his own has led to disaster. She informs him "charity should begin at home. A discreet husband would leave the dispensation of his bounty, where women are concerned, to his wife. And for my part, if I were inclined to exercise my benevolence at all, it should be in favour of some more deserving object than that whining, hypocritical Magdalene" (131). Despite her shrewishness, the narrator argues that no men who are "reported to be under petticoat government" are dissatisfied with their lot, "upon the ground that these domineering dames possess some charm sufficiently strong enough to counteract the irritating effect of their tempers" (132). Mrs Wood's animosity towards Mrs Sheppard's supposed lower-class status

reflects her anxieties over her own female reputation. Lucia Zedner highlights how “[t]he prescriptive ideology of femininity in Victorian England gave women an important moralizing role,” (2) something Mrs Wood personifies, and adds that “[t]he ideal of femininity was invested in the middle-class wife and mother whose asexual, morally uplifting influence was held as a vital bulwark against the sordid intrusions of industrial life” (11). Mrs Wood’s efforts to keep the fallen Mrs Sheppard out of her home suggest she wishes to avoid the contamination of her reputation and domestic space. While in her rebukes to her husband Mrs Wood may deviate from the passive norms of middle-class femininity, she does so to protect the purity of the domestic space, and always returns to these norms, something also surprisingly true of criminal characters in the novel. Mrs Wood remains the only character in the novel who deviates from feminine norms and yet does not become criminal, however, it is interesting to note that her deviance is still punished through her murder at the hands of Blueskin. The author makes the suggestion that female deviance is acceptable if led by unfortunate circumstances, which he proves further through more criminal characters.

<18>Mrs Sheppard, on the other hand, has a more ambiguous role. As mothers and wives, Mrs Sheppard and Mrs Wood are comparable, but there are important differences between them. While Mrs Wood is a flawed version of the ideal middle-class woman, from her perspective Mrs Sheppard is, on the surface, almost its antithesis. Mrs Sheppard’s reliance on alcohol is foregrounded initially when Mr Wood reminds her that “Gin Lane’s the nearest road to the churchyard” (60). When her naturally inferior sex is coupled with alcohol, Mrs Sheppard is doomed. By the end of the novel, she is in an asylum for the insane and driven to commit suicide. Mrs Sheppard explains her addiction:

When I have traversed the streets a houseless wanderer, driven with curses from every door where I have solicited alms, and with blows from every gateway where I have sought shelter—[...] when frenzied with want, I have yielded to horrible temptation, and earned a meal in the only way I could earn one—when I have felt, at times like these, my heart sink within me, I have drunk of this drink, and have at once forgotten my cares, my poverty, my guilt.... (60)

Mrs Sheppard is a victim of a hostile environment and her statement that she “earned a meal in the only way I could earn one” clearly identifies her involvement in prostitution. Prostitutes, like other criminal women, violated feminine norms in that they were potentially autonomous, eschewed marital expectations, and indulged in sexual activity outside of the patriarchal containment of marriage (Callahan 1030).

<19>However, the passive description of Mrs Sheppard as a victim of circumstances still allows her to remain within contemporary understandings of normal femininity. From the end of the eighteenth century onwards, public sympathy for prostitutes increased. Mary Peace suggests that the London Magdalen Hospital for Penitent Prostitutes (1758) treated streetwalkers as victims of their situation (141). In the early eighteenth century, when Jack Sheppard was alive, prostitutes tended to be regarded as rebellious, dirty figures, a view maintained in the century the novel was written: the first Bill of the Contagious Diseases Act (1864) stated that “[i]f any

common Prostitute is in any public Place...for the Purpose of Prostitution...any Police or Constabulary...having good Cause to believe that such common Prostitute has a Contagious Disease may...take her into Custody [sic]" (3). The novel demonstrates this contrast between the old view of prostitution, which saw these women as unredeemable choosers of a vicious life, and the more contemporary view, in which these women were potentially redeemable from their circumstances through hospital treatment and education. Ainsworth's inclusion of prostitutes suggests his understanding and sympathy for those members of the lower classes who find themselves in helpless situations and, in the person of Mrs Sheppard, invites this response from readers.

<20>Mrs Sheppard is a victim of circumstances and limited options. Zedner notes the vulnerability of "the working-class woman [who] had only limited powers to ensure the moral propriety of her family" (17). Without a husband, Mrs Sheppard has no income. Despite investing in norms of femininity, through her self-sacrificing and demure nature she has been controlled by her husband and left destitute, and yet she retains a vestige of ideal domestic femininity in the pure and deep love she holds for her child. In the opening scene she cries: "I cannot part with [Jack]...indeed, indeed I cannot" and explains "...if I lost my child I should lose all I have left in the world" (58). Jack is a consolation for her widowhood. However, in addition to her circumstances, it is her son and his actions that drive her to the asylum and to suicide. Many contemporary readers would have been shocked by Mrs Sheppard's maternal desertion of domestic duty, when she allows Jack to be cared by someone other than herself. Martin J. Wiener believes this was "perhaps the leading explanation for the rising scourge of juvenile delinquency" (17). Jack Sheppard's career would have spoken to many readers' belief that when mothers chose not to bring up their children themselves, even if they believed that they were acting for the best, the child was at a greater risk of a life of crime. Although Mrs Sheppard had reluctantly given up Jack to provide him with better prospects, he seeks fellowship and emotional bonds and is drawn to the close-knit ties of criminal gangs. From here, he becomes one of the most famous criminals in history. The causes and effects apparent in Mrs Sheppard's life are portrayed sympathetically by Ainsworth, especially in the way Mrs Sheppard almost begs for Jack to stay with her. In the rest of the novel, Ainsworth appears to challenge his readers to feel sympathy for complex criminal characters whose real counterparts were too often ignored or dismissed as morally corrupt during this period.

<21>Mrs Sheppard's suicide is her ultimate act of disconnection from the conventions of Victorian society. In the same vein as Barbara Lovell and her granddaughter, Sybil, Mrs Sheppard's preparations for death would not have been considered adequate as "[t]he art of dying became more dependent on the art of living, living as a good Christian" (MacDonald and Murphy 2). However, Mrs Sheppard has managed to turn her life around and is regularly seen in church. Between the 1720s and the 1830s there was a gradual shift in views towards suicide. Some penalties were removed and, although still regarded by the religious as a sin, suicide was treated more sympathetically by the 1830s. Suicides in the past had been "buried at a cross-roads with a stake through the heart" (3). MacDonald and Murphy note, however, that "[e]ven if Victorians were unwilling to resume the punishments that their ancestors had inflicted on suicides and their families, they still believed that self-killing was bad" (351). They suggest that

“in the eighteenth century, Enlightenment philosophy and the secularization of the world-view of European élites prompted writers to depict suicide as the consequence of mental illness or of a rational choice” (2). This more sympathetic view is evident in Mrs Sheppard’s final act. Her madness is evident in her wild comments on hearing Jack speak to her: “It is *not* Jack’s voice...I am not to be deceived. The knife is at my breast. Stir a foot, and I strike” (434). Due to the fact that Mrs Sheppard’s death can be attributed to madness and not suicide, she can be buried in the churchyard.

<22>While many middle-class Victorian readers may have attributed Mrs Sheppard’s insanity to her moral weakness, symbolized by her prior dependence on alcohol, Ainsworth generates sympathy by showing her fears for Jack and the trauma of discovering his worsening criminality, compounded by the difficult life she has led. The matron, without knowing his identity, informs Jack “it’s all owing to [her son] his poor mother’s here...Those who act wickedly bring misery on all connected with them...it would melt a heart of stone to see her” (317). The verb “melt” encourages a feeling response to the mad woman, an attitude becoming more prevalent at this time. In 1828 and 1845 respectively, new Acts were passed to improve the care and restrict the incarceration of lunatics.⁽⁹⁾ New County Asylums meant more paupers were committed as lunatics for behavior far from modern understandings of madness. Mrs Sheppard is a prime example of the way a woman’s circumstances can drive her to madness rather than her deviation from traditional norms; she is pushed to insanity by a build-up of intolerable experiences: the death of her husband and her destitute circumstances; giving up her child to Mr Wood; and her son’s life of crime and career under the eye of Jonathan Wild. All of this is outside of her control. Mrs Sheppard, then, meets her fate at the hands of powerful men, having lost most of her links to the respectable world of the domestic woman. Ainsworth provides enough traces of this virtuous ideal in her character, however, for the reader to recognize her lost potential.

<23>Despite Mrs Sheppard’s past, she is arguably redeemed from her desperate station at the novel’s beginning. She is represented as demure, self-sacrificing, repentant, moral, and her “countenance had an air of refinement about it...which seemed to intimate that her true position in society was far above that wherein accident had placed her” (215) (and it is of course revealed that she is in fact of aristocratic birth). Mrs Sheppard’s aristocratic birth has a dimension that is beyond the literal, symbolizing her original virtue and worth, which circumstances have corroded. Her birth also symbolizes the “Angel in the House” characteristics, which remain present despite her difficulties, suggesting a nature above nurture argument. In fact, although she has had an unsavory past, in her reformed state Mrs Sheppard more closely resembles the Victorian feminine ideal of the “Angel in the House” than Mrs Wood. Mrs Sheppard is modest, demure, obedient, and is concerned only with the welfare of her son, unlike Mrs Wood, who acts continually out of selfish motivations. Ainsworth complicates the reader’s sympathies by splitting the characteristics of the “Angel in the House” between Mrs Sheppard and Mrs Wood. In doing so, there is a suggestion that he sees the ideal mode of femininity as unrealistic. Ainsworth successfully emphasizes the narrator’s and, implicitly, the reader’s sympathy for women in a similar position to Mrs Sheppard, though there are other female criminals with whom the novel does not deal sympathetically.

<24>While readers are encouraged to sympathize with Mrs Sheppard because of her selfless care for her son and her repentance for her dissolute life, other female characters do not receive the same sympathy. In contrast to the ambiguous characters of Mrs Wood and Mrs Sheppard, Edgeworth Bess and Poll Maggot are clearly criminals, but they are still bound in their representation to many gendered norms. Both women are prostitutes, and the characters' historical originals confirm this. Elizabeth Lyon (Edgeworth Bess' real name) was sentenced to transportation in 1726 for the theft of "6 Silver Spoons, a pair of Silver Tongs, a Silver Strainer, a Gown, and a Handkerchief, on the 31st of January, in the Night [sic]" (March 1726). During her defense, Elizabeth Lyons stated that a worker at the house she robbed "pickt her up in the Street, and gave her these Spoons to lye with her [sic]" (March 1726). Edgeworth Bess not only involves herself in criminal activity but, by doing so, she gains economic independence.

<25>Edgeworth Bess, by contrast to Poll Maggot, is given more narrative space and sympathy, perhaps because she fulfills a more feminine role. Devoted to Jack and inseparable from him, Bess, "who passed for Sheppard's wife," (282) is treated as such when they are imprisoned together: "No prisoner except Edgeworth Bess was placed in the same cell with him" (283). The image of the couple in the cell is a marked contrast with the homely image of the Woods, who live in a comfortable house surrounded by family. During Jack's last moments, Bess reverts to the sentimental feminine type: "As soon as [Bess] beheld him, she uttered a loud scream, and fainted...[a]s to Mrs Maggot, whose nerves were more firmly strung, she contented herself with waving her hand affectionately to her lover, and encouraging him by her gestures" (474). The quotation highlights both Bess' weaker feminine nature and Poll's stronger and more masculine nature.

<26>The mannishness of Poll Maggot indicates a greater deviation from a properly feminine character than Edgeworth Bess. Her "man's laced hat...cocked knowingly on her head, harmonized with her masculine appearance" (228). The word "cocked" and her knowingness gives Poll characteristics that are conventionally male, as does her description as "a perfect Amazon" (227), which suggests masculine attributes of martial valor. The idea of the Amazon as a female warrior has important connotations for Poll's strong character and cannot be ignored. Although Jack exerts some influence over Poll, she is boisterous enough to reject marriage, later living in sin with Mr Kneebone the woolen draper. In this section, Poll is referred to as 'Mrs Maggot' and more showily dressed, but Poll is still a mistress and mocks his feeble attempts to control her by threatening to make her go to her room: "'Make me!' echoed Mrs Maggot, bursting into loud contemptuous laugh. 'Try!'" (266). The masculine Poll seems to be a parody of Mrs Wood, bringing disorder and the decay suggested by her name to the domestic space.

<27>Unlike Edgeworth Bess, Poll Maggot's historical original is more elusive. Hollingsworth describes her simply as "another woman" who stood with Edgeworth Bess talking with Jack while they helped him escape from the Condemned Hold of Newgate (132). Ainsworth seems to attempt to make Edgeworth Bess more redeemable, while without the historical baggage he has more artistic license to depict Poll as an inveterate criminal. While these women encourage Jack's criminality, Bess seems to embody the common belief that, as one Victorian commentator, Isa Craig put it in 1859: "[w]omen are more often the accomplices of crime, its

aiders and abettors, than its actual perpetrators" (291). King also highlights the tendency for women criminals to claim that they acted under the orders or influences of their husbands, portraying women as "weaker, as less culpable, or as more easily led astray," resulting in "more lenient trial outcomes for a wide range of female offenders" (192). Jack needs Poll and Bess's help to escape from The Condemned Hold and the two women are continually at his side. In *Jack Sheppard*, the more masculine Poll is cast aside and largely fades from the narrative. Ainsworth seems repelled by her masculine agency, preferring to focus on the romantically redeemable Bess, who can be contained within the conventional feminine role of love interest. By characterizing Poll as the more masculine woman character, Ainsworth both includes a character wildly deviating from feminine norms but also keeps her in the background of the novel. Both women, however, have a disturbing agency in that they prepare Jack's descent into criminality. They are knowing where he is not, and Jack is quickly seduced into the criminal world after a stand-off between the two prostitutes and Jack's mother when the pair have no trouble in convincing Jack to stay with them in the pub (229-231). Poll Maggot and Edgeworth Bess often exploit others around them to get what they need. Helen Johnston explains how it was widely believed that a man living in proximity to a prostitute "[is] brought into a life of criminality by his association with them or continuing a life of crime to support his lust for them" (126). Their agency and responsibility for Jack's decline signal an aggressive activity at odds with the passivity of the acceptable woman of the period.

<28>The criminal women of *Jack Sheppard* are the most deviant female characters to be found in the Newgate novels, but women such as Mrs Wood also suggest that female deviancy takes forms other than criminality. From 1830 up until the publication of Ainsworth's novel in 1839, women in Newgate novels had been more firmly rooted in expected gender norms, but increasingly, perhaps due to the enthusiasm of readers, their deviance increased. Enhanced awareness of the strength of the mental and physical abilities of women, and the accession of Queen Victoria, provided images of female power, encouraging the likes of Ainsworth to include more potent female characters in their novels.

<29>Bulwer's omission of female criminals and Ainsworth's tendency to avoid placing them in the foreground of his novels highlight how male authors viewed them with some anxiety and generally adhered to the gender ideology of their time. The authors' idealized representations of women as perfect, virtuous, and passive creatures requires the depiction of deviant, active, and criminal women as a contrast. The representation of criminal women at all, however, often concedes potential agency and power to women despite their criminality sometimes being a result of their environment. The increasing prevalence of female criminals in the later Newgate novels reflects a change between the beginning and end of the 1830s as the punishment rate for female criminals decreased, perhaps driven by public sympathy for women such as Sarah Lloyd and Eliza Fenning. Queen Victoria's accession to the throne in 1837, after well over one hundred years of male monarchical rule, certainly made female power topical. The Queen herself managed to balance political power with respectable domestic femininity, but the popular Newgate novels suggest that for her subjects these were not compatible facets of femininity.

<30>The criminal women of *Jack Sheppard* represent a fearful threat to the gender ideology underpinning the Victorian middle classes and their ideal of domesticity. Their prominence in Ainsworth's novel distinguishes it from earlier Newgate novels: from *Eugene Aram* (1832), in which there are no female criminals, and from *Rookwood* (1834), in which the female criminal begins to emerge. The accession of a female monarch in 1837 and feminist arguments for political representation and autonomy may have made questions of female power and agency interesting to readers of popular novels. This is an important dimension of *Jack Sheppard*, which is more usually discussed in relation to the controversy that followed its publication over its sympathy for the criminal classes, especially its male hero. The Newgate novelists engage with the contemporary topicality of women's status and power through popular fiction. Their increasing willingness to explore less acceptable aspects of the female character is balanced against a tendency to maintain their connection to conventional feminine norms, therefore retaining their readers' sympathy and understanding, but perhaps also safely containing the threat posed by the criminal woman.

Endnotes

(1)As Edward Bulwer did not include the Lytton part of his heritage in his name until 1844, at the bequest of his mother, throughout the rest of this article he shall be cited as Bulwer in accordance with his name over the period the article covers.([^](#))

(2)See Vic Gatrell's *The Hanging Tree* (1994) (335) and Cathy Callahan's "Women Who Kill: An Analysis of Cases in Late Eighteenth- and Early Nineteenth-Century London."([^](#))

(3)See for example James Reid's "On the Symptoms, Causes, and Treatment of Puerperal Insanity" (1848).([^](#))

(4)See in particular Gleadle's case study of Barbara Leigh Smith and Bessie Rayner Parkes, in which she explains the way that the radical Unitarian movements of the 1830s and 1840s had an undeniable influence on the 1850s feminist movement (177-183).([^](#))

(5)As Caine notes: "historians have become ever more aware of the range and complexity of feminist activities and of the diversity of approach and political commitment even amongst the leading figures of the English women's movement" (3).([^](#))

(6)Robert Peel's Prison Act (1823) "set out to abolish the worst evils of prison life" (Rose 121). In particular, women were to be held in a separate area of the prison, attended by women officers (122).([^](#))

(7)Lucy Brandon, the niece of a well-known lawyer is the only major, note-worthy female character in *Paul Clifford*, and the descriptions of her beauty ensure she is rooted in contemporary feminine norms.([^](#))

(8)See Lavater's *Physiognomy* (1826) for information on the physiognomy of the criminal that was widely believed in contemporary society.(^)

(9)The Madhouse Act (1928) and The Lunatics Act (1845).(^)

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